

Burn by kittenCorrosion

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, mileven - Relationship, minor lumax i guess

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Summary:

It's been four years since El returned to them, since she was given a name and allowed her freedom. But the pain of the past and the fear that comes with it won't leave her. It keeps her awake at night and exhausts her family and friends, makes her feel guilty and like a burden.

Mike finally comes up with a plan to try and help his suffering girlfriend... if he can convince his friends to go along with it. A fellow party member requires their assistance and after all the times she's saved their lives, can they really say no?

1. I'm not okay

Author's Note:

hello friends i've returned with something i hope you'll like. this one is short, about three chapters or potentially four, i'm not sure yet, but kind of fun and sweet. i'm still working on it but i feel confident enough about it that i think i'm ready to post.

this is for beth: who's been there leaving me the most amazing comments and sharing her journey with me and believing in me and who i appreciate even though i never say it out loud. she requested older teens many moons ago, so i hope this is okay and that you'll like it. thank you. <3

The pine needles and twigs crackled beneath her bare feet as she ran, faster and faster, as fast as she could, gasping and panting, glancing over her shoulder, fear billowing off of her in waves as the ratty hospital gown snagged on bushes and branches and thorns. Everything hurt but she couldn't stop moving, terrified of what would happen. Each time she looked, the building still loomed behind her, the dark structure only seeming to get closer, it's blockish shape covering what little light the moon offered. She stumbled, knees hitting the rough earth and then she was being sucked backward, toward the void, the doors opening like the mouth of monster, swallowing her whole as she screamed.

Painful silence. Suffocating. Pitch black. And then...

There were hands, too many hands, everywhere, reaching for her. Rough hands that gripped her arms and hauled her down the cold tile hallway, towards more darkness—the darkness that filled her head and mind and left her alone with only her fears. Familiar starched white uniforms and the sterile smell of the rubbing alcohol that dampened her inner arm before the prick of a needle.

She was kicking, fighting, trying to bite or scratch, but they were strong, so

strong, and from behind her she heard the familiar disappointed sigh.

“No! No! Mike!” Her voice was ragged, screams echoing off the damp walls. “Mike!”

Her body was thrown, knees and elbows bruising against the copper walls of the familiar prison, scrabbling to turn, just as the door started to shut. From the shadow stepped a figure, white hair gleaming under the fluorescent lights.

“Oh, Eleven,” Papa sighed, the usual cold, tired disappointment filling his eyes. “Did you ever think you would really be free?”

The door slammed shut and she was screaming and crying and begging, throwing herself against it, pleading to go back, for Hopper to come, for Mike to—

“Kid! Hey!” Gentle hands were shaking her shoulders. “Jane, kid, it’s just a dream. Wake up!”

Her eyelids cracked open and she saw the familiar shape of her room, the lamp beside her bed lighting the wooden boards of the cabin’s interior. It had been her home for almost five years now, an addition on one side creating a much needed bedroom for her adopted father and a slightly larger bathroom that they still shared. Right then the sight of the worn wooden planks were like oxygen and she felt her heart rate start to calm as she turned to look up at Hopper, the panic of the nightmare still evident in her eyes.

“H-Hop?” Her throat felt scratchy and she swallowed, gazing into the faded blue eyes that were filled with concern as they observed her. They hadn’t quite made it to “Dad” yet, but she had stopped calling him Jim and they’d both considered it a triumph.

“Hey, kid.” He offered a soothing smile, trying to be calm for her. “Another nightmare?”

His hands relaxed as she nodded, dodging his gaze, suddenly ashamed. It wasn’t the first time that week. In fact, it was probably the third. Each time her screaming had woken him and he’d managed to break her out of the terror... but he was starting to look exhausted.

As exhausted as she felt all the time.

She didn't deserve his patience or care but she hunched towards him, feeling the usual desire for the safety that he offered.

"Are they getting worse? I could take you to the doctor Joyce mentioned, the thera—"

"No doctors," she blurted.

Hopper stared at her a moment longer but then sighed and nodded. There were certain things he wouldn't make her do, things he knew might only make it worse. It was hard to trust people with her anyway, the powers and trauma and leftover fear of strangers making both of them wary. She was seventeen now, so much different from the small girl he'd first found shivering in the woods. Her curls had turned into loose waves that brushed past her shoulders and she'd managed to get a little taller despite her more petite size, beating Joyce's 5'3 height by an inch. She was barely still a kid and he was trying to get used to respecting her decisions, let her start getting a foothold on independence.

But it was getting harder to let her say no to help.

"Do you..." His eyes drifted to the Supercom that sat on her desk. "Do you want to talk to him?"

El hesitated but shook her head. "No. He needs sleep."

"So do you." Hop seemed almost nervous but deflated, reaching to set his hand over hers, unable to hide the concern. "Look, kid, they've been getting worse this past month and I *know* you don't like to talk to me about it but—"

"I'm okay," she cut him off insistently. "I just... need some water."

She moved to get out of the bed but he stopped her, shaking his head and tucking her back into the cozy sheets and quilt. He was out the door and back before she really had time to protest, clutching a cold glass of water and setting it on the nightstand next to the lamp and picture frame. The frame that held that first awkward picture from the Snow Ball, her polka dot dress clashing with the red tie and

brown blazer of the boy whose arm was awkwardly hovering around her shoulder. Her eyes flicked back up to her father, obvious worry written into the lines that wrinkled his unshaven face. She wanted to pretend she didn't see it. That she didn't know what was coming next as he let out another long sigh.

"Jane—El," he said more softly, using the nickname that was more... her. Jane was mostly to keep up the charade but he was used to it and she didn't mind. "You went through a lot. It's okay to not feel... one hundred percent yet. I know you've been okay for a long time but if the PTSD is coming back—"

"It's not." She flinched at the word. The one she'd been given garishly colored pamphlets about, that made people look at her like she was broken. "It's just... bad dreams," she replied stubbornly, not wanting to admit he was right. But the image of the dark building flashed behind her eyelids and she couldn't hide a shiver. "I... I'll be fine. Go back to sleep."

"Kid..."

"Please."

Her voice broke a bit and he moved forward but she shook her head and quickly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, before any tears had the chance of falling. No, crying was not going to happen tonight. She was tired enough to fall back asleep if he would just let her, the whole ordeal making her feel as if she was made of dust and would explode into nothing if she let the first tear fall. He knew how stubborn she was and when it was better to just give up, sighing again instead and nodding instead of forcing her to talk about memories she wasn't ready to face. Forcing never worked and right then he knew she just needed to stop feeling afraid.

His eyes were reluctant but he nodded. "Okay, I'll head back to bed... but if this keeps happening, we're going to have to do *something*. It doesn't have to be this way, kid."

"I know," she agreed softly. "I'm sorry."

A quiet moment passed where he just observed her as she hung her

head, seeming guilty or maybe ashamed of just how little control she had over her fears. He visibly softened and walked back over to her, sitting on the edge of the bed. His hug was warm and gentle and she sniffled as she buried her face into his shoulder, the smell of coffee and cigarettes a sudden comfort.

Safe. Home. Hopper.

He pulled back and then pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head, feeling her sigh and curl into him further, holding tighter for another heartbeat, as if he was trying to take all of the bad feelings and emotions from her. Her hand squeezed his arm and he relaxed. With another wordless glance he nodded—knowing he'd done all he could in that moment—and stood, clicking off her light and wandering back to his own bed. It was the most he could give her and she was grateful that he tried but it just wasn't something she wanted to talk about. At least... not with him.

Hop was good at a lot of things. Making breakfast and telling jokes that were bad enough she actually laughed. He'd given her a home and found a way to get her a name, helped her become an actual person in the eyes of the law. Had become the father she'd never truly had, the cruel shadow of Papa hidden behind his strong figure. Protector. Wise. Strong.

But he kind of sucked at understanding when it came to the nightmares. He tried offer solutions to fix it, but that's not how it worked, not quite what she needed. He'd seen a lot in his younger days, but their minds were different and no one—other than Kali, maybe, but that hurt to think about—knew what it had been like growing up in that hellhole with no hope. No one who *truly* understood.

She did have someone who tried to understand.

Her eyes wandered back to the walkie-talkie, shining dimly in the bit of moonlight glowing through her window. More than anything she wanted to grab it, whisper the name of the person who always made her feel better and let him spin wild stories of magical lands and daring adventures until the cold shivers in her stomach faded and she fell asleep to the sound of his voice in her ear.

Instead she glanced at her alarm clock, noting that it was past three in the morning. Too late. If she woke him up he wouldn't be able to fall back asleep and he would come to school in a few hours looking even more tired. The bags under his eyes darkening as he yawned and insisted he was fine, that he would rather talk to her than sleep anyways, that it wasn't a big deal.

Her heart softened at the thought of her boyfriend, towering over her with his newfound height and wrapping a warm arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. The smell of fabric softener and pencil shavings and his Old Spice deodorant he thought made him seem more manly.

Sweet Mike, always so willing to calm her fears and chase away the nightmares. It had been years, four since she'd come back, two since they started officially dating, and he was still so amazing and incredible and every other word she'd learned that meant "good". If she woke him up he wouldn't be mad. He wouldn't even think to be mad. He was that perfect.

She sucked in a breath and rolled away from the Supercom. It wasn't fair. She wouldn't do it to him again. Not tonight.

Instead she exhaled a shaky breath, tucking her blankets over her shoulder and closing her eyes, trying to breath and find the calm. But the image of the lab, it's doors opening as it sucked her back to the prison in the tile caverns below kept her awake the rest of the night.

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"Miss Hopper!"

There was the thwack of a book hitting her desk and El's drooping eyelids snapped open as she jumped upright so fast the vertebrae in her neck popped. She looked around, trying to place herself in her surroundings, realizing she was still sitting in American History, every eye in the classroom on her as the wrinkled face of Mrs. McClintock scowled down at her.

Fuck. She'd totally fallen asleep.

“Um, yes?” She felt her heart rate spike up, sweat dampening her palms as there were titterings and whispers from the back of the room.

“Since you can’t be bothered to pay attention, how about you read the next chapter for us? So I know that you’re learning *something* instead of just *sleeping in my class*,” the angry teacher seethed, clearly offended.

“U-Um...” El felt panic well up. She hated reading in front of the class more than anything, she always stumbled over words she didn’t know and had trouble pronouncing them sometimes. Sure, she’d improved considerably when it came to vocabulary thanks to her father and friends, but it still wasn’t something she was *good* at. But she couldn’t say no. “Um, okay.”

Her voice was weak as she started to read the textbook, talking about the trade in the Atlantic between the islands in the Caribbean and the colonies and Africa. Some of the words weren’t even in English and she stared at them in confusion until Mrs. McClintock mercifully supplied the correct pronunciation. Every time she stuttered there was soft laughter and it made it harder to concentrate, the whispers that followed her through the halls suddenly echoing in her ears, the ones that called her *freak* and *retard* and *psycho*.

She’d managed to piss off the clique of popular girls on her first day, creating a grudge she hadn’t fully understood until they’d cornered her and told her that she was ugly and stupid, putting gum in her hair. That coupled with Troy’s stories and her bad speech and quiet ways had branded her a freak, an outsider, someone who wasn’t *normal*. Rumors of where she came from turned more cruel, and the most prevalent one was that she’d come from the nuthouse out in Kerley county, that the Chief had taken her to try and help them out. That weird stuff happened around her, windows blowing out and people being shoved by invisible forces. Not to mention that despite her pretty face and likable smile, she chose to hang out with nerdiest losers in the entire school.

The freak and her nerd boyfriend and loser friends. A walking circus.

Tears blurred her eyes and she tried to keep from sniffing but the

tears hit the page anyway and she inhaled sharply, trying to wipe her eyes without being noticed.

“Is she *crying*?” A voice whispered sharply. The laughter was no longer hushed.

“Alright, that’s enough, Miss Hopper.” The teacher quieted the class before it got too out of hand, shooting the troublemakers in the back of the class a serious look before her disapproving glare rested fully on El’s trembling form. “I hope you’ll think twice before deciding my class is the place to take a nap.”

The tears silently rolled down her cheeks the rest of the period.

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At lunch, Mike noticed that something was wrong the second she met him at his car. They were both always the first to arrive to their group’s preferred lunch spot. Her eyes and nose were red, face blotchy from crying in class and then alone in the bathroom in a stall between bells. She tried to smile at him, knowing he wouldn’t believe that nothing was wrong but needing to try anyways.

At first he said nothing as the both jumped onto the hood of his car, his corduroy-covered thigh pressed against the skirt of her dress, his warmth sinking into her. His paper bag lunch sat in his lap like hers, but his eyes were on his clearly troubled girlfriend, sensing the wrongness in the air.

“El—”

His hand reached for hers but then Dustin arrived, plopping onto the hood of the grey Dodge Monaco with a long sigh. Mike didn’t have the time to get a word in as their friend started complaining about being put in a terrible group for his Drama class. El dodged her boyfriend’s eyes, pulling her lunch of it’s bag and staring at the plastic baggies full of cookies and vegetables.

“—don’t know why they’re even taking Drama if they don’t like to act! Like, how am I supposed to get a good grade when these assholes can’t pretend to be anything other than fucking stiff boards?!” Dustin

ranted through a mouthful of roast beef sandwich.

El stared at her own peanut butter and jelly, between two Eggos, one of her favorite lunches. Hopper had made it for her that day, a rather uncommon favor he did only occasionally now that she was more than capable of making it herself. It had been a nice gesture but now she realized she wasn't hungry. She was tired and sad and her eyes hurt and her throat was dry from crying and she just wanted to go home and crawl into her bed and maybe never come out again.

Max and Lucas showed up with Will, who was trying to mediate some argument between them. The two seemed to have reached another volatile point and El briefly wondered if they were going to break up again. It was a monthly occurrence, their feelings for each other solid but neither sure about how to deal with calling it a relationship. Between her hateful, unaccepting family and his refusal to be subtle or anything but proud, they bickered and fought and broke up and then would apologize and kiss and make up.

It made El even more grateful for Mike. They rarely fought over anything serious—and when they did it always had some sort of resolution—and she couldn't imagine ever being angry enough to want stop wanting him. He always made her talk out her problems and while he was known to have a temper that could explode if he was pushed too far, so far he'd managed not to explode on *her*.

She loved him so much it made her entire chest ache.

Except now his worried gaze was burning a hole into her as she studied her untouched bag of pepper slices and carrots. He slid his hand into hers instead of saying anything in front of their friends, the quick squeeze asking silently if she was okay. She shrugged in reply.

"God, Dustin, can you shut up for two seconds?" Max grumbled, clearly in a bad mood as she leaned against the side of the car, as far away from Lucas as possible.

"I'm having a *crisis*, Max, something you wouldn't understand!" Dustin shot back, throwing his hands up into the air. "I have to try and act out Shakespeare with a bunch of morons who've never even *read Hamlet*!"

Max rolled her eyes. He was always overdramatic. “Okay, well, that sucks but I’m tired of hearing you talk about it. Let somebody else talk for once.”

“Does anyone else *want* to talk?”

“I don’t know... you could ask.”

“That’s pointless. If someone wanted to say something they would have.”

“That’s impossible when you don’t even breathe between sentences. You’re like a fucking robot, Henderson, one that just yells all the time or something.”

“Robots aren’t made just to talk, Max, that’s stupid.”

“Isn’t that C3PO’s only function?”

“You did *not* just—”

It started turning into a full on argument and El felt the harsh words grating against her tired mind, shoving her food towards Dustin who didn’t even stop talking as he unwrapped her sandwich and started eating. She jumped down off the hood, staring across the parking lot as she hesitate, not sure where she wanted to go but needing to get away from... everything.

A hand nudged hers and she felt Mike’s presence towering above her, all furrowed brow and quiet concern. She let him intertwine their fingers and pull her away from their friends who barely acknowledged the couple’s disappearance as they started walking to the side of the parking lot, where woods edged the asphalt and only the smokers usually hung out. They made their way through clouds of acrid cigarette and weed smoke until they were lost further into the trees, Mike leading her wordlessly until they were alone in a small clearing, obscured by the leaves that were just starting to change color.

He turned, leaning back against a tree, watching her for a moment before finally asking the damn question she knew he’d wanted to ask the second he saw her. The usual one.

“El, are you okay?” His eyes were so damn *soft* and *warm* and she felt tears well up in her own as he finally broke down the last bit defense she’d tried to build up. It took two seconds for him to wrap her in his arms and then she was sobbing into the front of his hoodie, soaking the dark navy material with her tears. “Hey, it’s okay, shhh,” he soothed, holding her securely, his hand rubbing the back of her sweater, his lips finding her temple and pressing a kiss there. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she sobbed. “I’m so...” She hiccuped, unable to go on, ashamed to admit the truth.

His voice was low and gentle against her ear. “What, El? You can tell me, come on.”

She knew he was right. She could tell him anything. It had never changed how he felt about her and it wouldn’t change anything now. The shame of being weak, the guilt of being a burden, all of it faded away as she let herself confess the truth, trembling in her boyfriend’s impossibly strong arms.

“I-I-I’m so t-tired,” she whimpered, voice breaking, her whole body shaking, blinded by tears.

“Tired?”

“Of b-being *scared*.”

The truth was out and she sobbed harder, feeling so ashamed for being scared of something that was in the past. The lab was abandoned and empty, Papa gone, the bad men thrown out of Hawkins. She was safe. She was home. Mike was holding her just like Hopper had last night and both of them would always protect her from the bad things. But she was still afraid and she *hated* it. She hated feeling... weak. She had never been weak before. It wasn’t *fair*.

After another minute she started to quiet, hiccuping and pulling back, wiping at the snot string that connected her to Mike’s hoodie and feeling gross but a little better. Letting it out always helped but she’d bottled it up the past few weeks and last night. And then today... had sucked. And it was only halfway over. More than anything she

wanted to stay right there, alone in the woods with Mike's arms around her, his voice gently murmuring that it was okay. Somehow she always believed him when he told her that.

But they had ten minutes before fifth period started and it was Advanced Calculus, the only class they had together, so it would be far too suspicious to skip. Even though nothing sounded better staying there in that moment.

"El." His breath was warm in her hair. October was looming and it was getting chillier. "Is it the nightmares again?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"You could have called me last night. I would have answered." He almost sounded hurt.

"I know, but... you're tired too." Her voice felt small. "We shouldn't both be tired."

"If you need to talk—"

"I didn't need to."

"Yes you did," he argued. "You look exhausted... did you sleep at all?"

His hand found her chin, his thumb pressing against the dimple and tilting her face up to look at him. The familiar dark eyes scanned her features, taking in the tired bags and sallowness, her eyes red from the tears and lack of sleep. She knew she looked like shit, but he just sighed, unhappy at how stressed out she seemed. His question didn't need an answer.

"What was... was it the lab again? The same nightmare?"

He knew the collection of terrors that haunted her, the sounds of the monster breaking through, the one where he and his friends were cold corpses covered in slugs, the horde of demo-dogs that overpowered her. And the lab, full of horrors he'd never seen and memories he would never fully understand. It had been the persistent one, the one that kept coming back every couple of months and

wearing her out.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Even then, in that moment, standing in the middle of the forest with no way to tell the direction, she could feel it. A slight tug on her right side, somewhere in the distance, a hushed exhale whispering, waiting for her. Her first home. Her prison. The only world she’d known.

“It’s empty, El. There’s no one there. That... that asshole is gone. They’re all gone,” Mike tried to sound encouraging. “You’re *safe*. Nothing is going to make you go back.”

“I know,” she whispered again, the fear making her voice tremble as she admitted the feeling that crept over her like a cold shiver. Her insides quivered, her entire body suddenly ice. “But it’s always... calling, Mike. It’s waiting for me.”

“It’s not, El. There’s nothing there.”

“It’s *always* there.”

She dared to look up at him, his expression peaking into worry as he saw the grim despair that haunted her eyes. There were no more tears, just genuine fear, and he frowned pulling her to him again, holding her tighter, trying to find something that would reassure her, calm her, make her feel better. He always knew the right words, to say—he was the word guy and she was one who just always understood when there were no words to be found. A perfect match.

“I... we’ll figure something out, El. So you don’t have to be afraid. I promise.” He swallowed thickly and she felt him tense, felt how serious he was as he gripped her firmly, his arms suddenly the safest place in the world. “You’re going to be okay. I’m going to figure it out. I *promise*, El.”

“Okay,” she whispered, clinging to him more tightly as she buried her face into his hoodie, closing her eyes and letting everything but the feel and the smell of him and the comfort he offered fade away. “Okay, Mike.”

In the distance the bell rang, signaling the end of the lunch period,

but neither moved. For that moment they were safe. There was no lab, no memories, nothing bad. They were okay.

They were late for fifth period.

Notes for the Chapter:

let me know what you think please. encouragement and validation are my drugs and will like fuckin motivate me like none other. i've been struggling with inspiration lately and finding time to write when i actually feel like i'm able to and not just forcing. adult life is kind of hard guys... idk.

i'll try and have the next chapter up before next week but it might not be until the weekend, i'll have to see how far i can get before then. no promises.

i've missed you all.

-g

2. But I promise you I'll keep you safe

Notes for the Chapter:

i wanted to get these chapters out quick but i'm still working on the third one. action is not my strong suit we'll say, so planning this is tiring and i'm trying to get it right.

mike is the best... i'm so excited filming starts tomorrow! fingers crossed for some cute mileven scenes to kick off season three. gah, i'm so excited.

anywhoo hope you like it.

Mike looked up over his Calculus book just in time to see El's head drop backward onto her pillow, her eyes closed, mouth hanging open as gurgled snore left her throat. His heart fluttered and he didn't hide the grin as she let out another snort and rolled onto her side, her own textbook sliding from her lap. He'd always thought she was extra cute when she fell asleep, usually on his shoulder or in his lap as they stretched out on a blanket or a bed together. It made him smile.

But the smile faded as he remembered the reason for her recent exhaustion.

It was the nightmares still. It had almost two weeks since she'd confessed to him in the woods at school, two weeks where she'd tried to suffer silently, only awakening him with the crackle of static twice. There was no way the terrors had only bothered her two nights, her tired expression as he picked her up for school telling him otherwise, but she stubbornly refused to wake him. Not even his fairytales could chase away the demons this time.

More frustratingly, he *still* hadn't been able to think up a solution. Instead he was forced to watch as his girlfriend's eyes grew more and more hollow, the dark circles and a permanent worry line between her brows deepening and darkening. His chest felt numb with rage at the people who had given her the fears. Each time she cried to him through the Supercom, each time he saw the tired surrender as she

was handed another bad grade, it made the rage grow stronger.

He felt so fucking *useless*.

All his life he'd been the one with the answer. The nerd who raised his hand with the correct number for the equation, the trophies and report cards proving his intelligence. When Will had gone missing he'd relentlessly searched for answers that made sense before accepting that it was something bigger than he'd thought possible. When all hope had been lost and he'd had to watch his friend suffer, he'd figured out the Mind Flayer's plan. When El had returned to him only to be ripped away to save the world again he'd come up with his own plan to help make sure she would make it home to him.

He'd saved her then. Why couldn't he save her now?

With a sigh he scooted their homework carefully to the side, reaching for the blanket at the end of her bed and gently covering her with it, smoothing her hair behind her ear before leaving her to sleep. She mumbled something softly and snuggled further into her pillow.

It was Saturday. She deserved to nap for a bit while he finished their homework out at the table in the "dining" room. They were the only two from their friend group in Advanced Calculus so weekends meant going to each other's houses and working on all the assignments for the week—a viable excuse to spend time together that was parent-approved. And it was fun to figure out the equations and memorize the formulas ahead of time. El had picked up on math instantly, the numbers and formulas straightforward compared to the letters and words that gave her so much trouble. She'd sped through the basics and managed to get into the Calc class, a feat that had surprised and pleased her, immediately signing up for it. Mike had mostly taken it to have at least one period with her, but he had figured it wouldn't hurt his college applications and math wasn't the worst anyways. The others had chosen science classes, Lucas to upper level Physics and Dustin to a new computer science class. Max had made it onto the softball team. Will was firmly rooted in the arts.

With a parting look at El's still form curled beneath her blanket, he grabbed his textbook and pencil, trying to avoid the usual squeaky floorboards as he crept from the room. He left the door open a crack

and then walked more easily towards the table near the “kitchen”, having memorized which parts of the wooden floor were the nosiest. The cabin was still kind of cramped but the addition had made it more of house than a hideout and Mike only really minded how small it was when Hopper was out of his room, roaming around and watching them as the cuddled on the couch or had food fights in the kitchen. Privacy was appreciated, one of the reasons he tried to have their study sessions at his house, where there wasn’t a chief of police hulking around every corner waiting to glare and clear his throat threateningly.

“Did she fall asleep?”

The chief’s voice came from behind Mike and he startled, whipping around to see the older man standing in front of the sink holding a soapy frying pan, a pair of yellow gloves on his hands as he washed. Mike hadn’t even seen him and took a deep breath, nodding.

“Yeah, um... I thought I’d let her nap for a bit,” he relaxed, opening his textbook back up. “Um, she hasn’t been sleeping that well...”

“I’m the one who hears her screaming at night, kid. I know she’s been struggling.” A pause. “Has she talked to you about it?”

They did actually like each other. It had taken a while for Mike to forgive Hop for not telling him she was safe—something he still occasionally lorded over the grizzled policeman—but eventually had come to respect him after seeing the home he’d built for her. Hopper had grown accustomed to the young man’s visits, knowing that if she did have a lovesick boy following her around, at least it was one with a good heart and an intelligent—if rather impulsive—head on his shoulders. Both were grateful to the other for filling the gaps in El’s life. It was a truce, perhaps, but something a bit more warm than that.

“It’s...” Mike swallowed, feeling torn. He didn’t want to tell all her secrets and fears, but if she was waking her dad up screaming almost every night, he deserved to at least know what it was that he was comforting her over. “It’s the lab. Again, um, that’s the one that comes back the most... the nightmares about it, I mean.” He paused, frowning, staring away, remembering the troubling words she’d

admitted to him as she sobbed in his arms. “She says she can still feel it... that it’s calling her.”

Hopper snorted. “That’s stupid. The bigwigs abandoned that place after your sister and Jonathan and Murray exposed Barbara’s death. They couldn’t open it back up if they tried, everyone here would run them back out of town.”

“I *know*,” Mike replied emphatically, not appreciating the condescending tone. “I told her that. She knows. But it just... it’s not enough, I guess,” he sighed, staring at the equations in his book and feeling tired.

Hopped seemed to accept that and there was a moment where neither spoke, Mike’s pencil scratching in his notebook as his girlfriend’s father finished scrubbing the pan, the rhythmic swoosh of the soapy water in the sink oddly soothing. But it felt tense somehow, like both were trying to think of a solution and failing, the tick of the clock on the wall becoming louder as it counted each second.

Hop finished the dishes, setting them on the rack to dry and wiping his hands, looking around the small interior of his house and spying the wood stove. There had been a temperature drop to herald the first day of October and it had been accompanied by the first freeze the night before, making the wooden structure chilly. He walked over to the stove, opening the glass door and sliding the last two pieces of firewood in.

“I’m heading out to get more wood,” he stated out loud, catching Mike’s eye with a raised a brow.

It was the usual, “I’m leaving you alone with my daughter and if I walk back in on something I don’t want to see I’ll chase you out of here with my loaded gun” look and Mike barely resisted rolling his eyes. As if he was going to wake up his exhausted, traumatized girlfriend just to get in a few minutes of make-out time while her dad was out.

He was nowhere near that cruel. Or stupid.

The door shut and he focused back on the math problem, frowning

down at the equation and shifting in his chair. His eyes drifted back over to the wood stove and the dancing flames behind the tiny glass window. They were captivating. Fire had always been something he'd liked to mess with, the stirrings of a pyromaniac in him as he set up a campfire or blew off a sparkling firework, sparks and gunpowder and the flames a bit intoxicating to watch.

His mind wandered back to the problem his mind couldn't seem to figure out. That fucking lab. He hadn't been back since the demodogs had taken it over, since Bob had saved them. That still made him sad. Bob had been one of his heroes along with Mr. Clarke... always ready to answer any question with a helpful smile. Mike would always be grateful to the kind man who had saved them by rebooting the building. He had given up everything to save what he loved.

A true hero.

And that damn place had taken him, just like it had almost taken El. She'd told him in quiet whispers some of what they'd done to her there. The poking and prodding, test after test, running on treadmills and having needles painfully take spinal fluid as she cried silently, being lowered into chilly water and shut in the dark, told to touch a monster. Each hesitation or refusal met with cold disappointment and the slam of a metal, soundproof door. And that was just what she told him. There were still things she mumbled in her sleep he didn't understand, shadows that haunted her eyes.

His fist clenched around his pencil, digging into his palm and he tried to relax his grip as he stared into the flames, picturing the small girl he'd first met in the woods. No wonder she still had nightmares. She'd been a little kid. A child. And they'd treated her like some damn lab rat.

That place... that fucking place. That prison. That hellhole.

It deserved to just... *burn*.

The door to the cabin opened as Hopper clambered in holding a stack of firewood and Mike jumped in surprise, eyes breaking from the wood stove, blinking at the bright spots behind his eyelids, trying to

blink them out of his vision. The older man gave him a weird look before turning and setting the wood in a neat pile on the floor next to the stove.

“You okay, Wheeler?” he called.

Mike blinked again, swallowing, as an idea sparked to life in his mind.

If just emptying the lab wasn’t enough to make her feel safe...

Maybe they needed to just... *destroy* it.

He sniffed, sitting up straight and casually scribbling a note in the corner of his math assignment, trying to act like the perfect plan wasn’t unfolding in his mind. After a moment he looked up, nodding, face relaxed as he nodded at the older man who was only half paying attention.

“Yeah.” Mike tried to hide the sudden grin, glancing at the door to the room where his sleeping girlfriend was snuggled beneath a blanket of safety. She would be able to sleep peacefully again. Soon. “I’m *great*.”

&&&

It took several weeks and helluva lot of convincing before the plan even started to take place. Lucas was first, because Mike knew if he could get Lucas on his side, everyone else would be easy. His quick-witted friend was the common sense, the bad idea alarm, the one who usually talked them out of the the really stupid plans.

But surprisingly, he hopped on board pretty quick.

“Okay,” he nodded, dark eyes glimmering. “Sounds good.”

“Really?” Mike’s eyebrows shot up his forehead.

“Yeah, sure. It’s an empty building... they’ll probably get a ton of insurance money out of it so it wouldn’t be huge loss... I don’t see the harm. And it’s for El... she’s saved our asses *how* many times?” Lucas shrugged, crossing his arms and casually leaning against his Jeep, his

most prized possession. Mike was still staring at him in shock. “It’s about time we did something for her. Have you asked Dustin yet? I’m sure he’ll be able to figure out how much gasoline we need.”

Mike swallowed, quickly moving to the next part of his plan he’d made. “Uh... no, I figured I’d tell you first.”

“Well, let’s go find him.”

Dustin was too excited to agree. If Mike was borderline pyro, Dustin was damn near admissible, immediately bouncing around with glee at the thought of being allowed to set something large on fire. He immediately started spewing questions and listing equations, looking between his two friends with shining eyes.

“Do you have blueprints of the place? I need to know square footage and how many levels so I can calculate how much gasoline we’ll need to cover it. If the fire doesn’t catch we’ll be totally fucked. Maybe I can call Mr. Clarke once we have the—”

“I’m working on getting the blueprints right now. What classes are you guys in? Anything related to architecture?” Mike butted in, looking at the two of them. “I need a solid lie to tell Flo. She’s a sucker for school projects.”

He’d spent enough time at the police station waiting for El or dropping her off to have gotten to know the older woman. She was exactly the grandmother type, always asking him about school and beaming when he told her about his accomplishments. It would be easy to get the blueprints as long as he had solid alibi. She did work for *cops* after all.

Lucas considered that and then brightened. “Will could probably do it. Architecture is like geometry and art, he’s good at both. Have you talked to him yet?”

Mike sighed. “No—”

“I think he’s still in the art classroom. He was helping Max, she’s in Pottery and she sucks so he said he’d help her,” Dustin interjected.

Both he and Mike noticed how Lucas tensed. Apparently the two

were on the rocks again and decided not to address at loud, standing instead and starting to head towards the art room on the other side of the school. "Well, we need to ask Max too, so that's fine."

"What? No... she won't like it," Lucas protested quickly. "She's not a delinquent anymore, she'll get pissed we're even considering it. We don't have to ask her, it could just be the four of us."

"This is official Party business and you wanted her in the party." Mike pushed. "And it's for El. They're like best friends now. We should at least ask her and see if she *wants* to help."

That particular female friendship had grown slowly. At first the two didn't seem to get along but then El had admitted she'd felt threatened by the other girl and soon enough Mike had helped her understand the truth of Max's place in the party. Of his unwavering affection for *her* and Max's unwavering affection for Lucas. El's face had been pink with embarrassment at her confession of insecurity but Mike had found it kind of cute and sweet. She'd been jealous... over him. Even though he wasn't sure he would find anyone he wanted more than her.

After that it had been subtle things, El would laugh at Max's jokes and Max would compliment El's outfit or hair. A slow build of trust. There had been one night after a campaign when the two girls had gone missing and Mike had wandered up to the kitchen to find them talking solemnly, in a way he'd seen his sister do with her friends, the kind of conversation you didn't dare interrupt. He'd backed away, telling the guys they were dealing with girl problems. And then suddenly the two were having sleepovers and confiding in each other, Max teaching El the basics of skateboarding while the quieter girl became a solid confidant, the cabin in the woods a safe place when things got a little out of hand at the Mayfield/Hargrove household.

El knew about bad men. She wouldn't let her friend deal with them alone.

Now Max was fiercely protective of her friend, helping to scare the popular girls away since El was too worried about exposing her powers to do it. They were an odd duo, but Mike was glad they got along even if sometimes they giggled and whispered his name and he

knew she was telling embarrassing stories about him. Oh well.

“Fine,” Lucas grumbled as he started to follow his friends toward the art room. “But you get to explain it. And when she loses her shit I’m not taking the blame. This was *your* idea.”

The three made their way down the hallway as Dustin chattered about gasoline and alcohol and other flammable materials they could use. Mike pushed the door to the art room open. It was full of tables covered in canvases, bags of clay in one corner next to a set of pottery wheels. The redhead was sitting there, wearing an apron and frowning at the lump of clay in front of her on the round apparatus. Will was standing next to her, crouched down, showing her how to hold the clay to help it form.

“—have to be firm but not too hard.”

“That doesn’t make sense. I have to be firm but not firm?” Max was clearly frustrated and at the sound of the door she looked up, spotting the three boys. Her eyes dragged across Lucas and then she quickly glanced away, poking Will’s shoulder. “The three stooges are here.”

Will stood up and turned, looking pleasantly surprised. “Oh, hey guys what’s going—”

“We’re going to burn down the lab!” exclaimed Dustin excitedly.

“Shhh!”

He was immediately suckerpunched by Lucas, grunting and grabbing his stomach as Mike elbowed him, both of them looking around frantically, nervous that there were listening ears somewhere in the corners of the empty room. The other two looked understandably confused.

“*What?*” Max arched an auburn brow, reaching up to push her hair out of her face, looking amused. “What are you talking about, dipshit?”

Mike sighed. This wasn’t how he wanted it to go. If Max tattled their plans to El they were sunk.

She was careful about what she did now, not wanting to end up with any more marks on her record. The truth had come out later why her family had moved from California. She had let Billy take the blame for a while—it's not like it was hard to picture him doing something bad enough that they had been forced to pick up and leave town—but in reality, it had been her stunts that had forced them to relocate. After her mom had married Neil she'd been pissed. The only way to get her anger out was to... do things. Bad things. It started as shoplifting and ended in breaking and entering. Her lockpick skills had got her into the local arcade, but the security camera had alerted the police before she'd managed to sneak back out with the bag of quarters.

She'd ended up in juvie court and after her stepdad had weaseled her out of her it with large sums of money, he'd packed them up and flown them to Hawkins. Billy was handed the responsibility of keeping an eye on her *and* took the blame when she fucked up. Sometimes Mike understood why he was such an asshole but then he remembered Steve lying on the floor being beaten almost to death and the empathy was replaced with revulsion.

When Max made a mistake, she wasn't the only one who paid for it. So fucking up again, doing something huge like... major arson? Mike wasn't sure if she'd go for it. He was relying on the bonds of sisterhood that had built between the fiery redhead and his girlfriend, hoping it would be enough. They needed as many hands as they could get.

"Um... well," he started, reaching up to scratch the back of his neck nervously as Max looked on, a skeptical eyebrow raised. "Okay, so El's been having nightmares again. Really bad ones, like... I think PTSD ones. It's why she's always so tired."

Max visibly softened, but Mike paused, feeling that twinge of guilt again for sharing his girlfriend's secrets. But if they were going to do this, they deserved to know. He pushed on.

"They're about the lab... she has a lot of different bad dreams but that one keeps... coming back. She says it feels like it's watching her... like it's waiting. She can't..." He sighed, feeling his heart break all over again as he remembered he terror-filled, hollow eyes. "It's

not fair. She's safe and the bad guys are gone but that stupid lab makes her feel so fucking *scared*. So scared she can't sleep. So scared she won't *talk to me*."

His words hung in the air, heavier than intended. All of his friends were staring at him with wide eyes, except for Will who seemed unsurprised, some part of him understanding. Mike knew they only were aware of some of El's ghosts and he was exposing her weakness, something they'd never seen. El had always been stronger than all of them combined, packed into a tiny, pink-ribbon covered package. Ruthless but sweet. Gentle but deadly. Loyal and brave.

Trying to imagine her crying alone in her bed at night... Mike could sense his friends' resolve growing stronger as they realized just how much their Mage was struggling.

"So I just thought... I thought maybe if we got *rid* of the lab, maybe the nightmares will stop. Or get better at least. I-I don't know..." He swallowed. "I mean, I know it sounds stupid but we have to try." They were still staring at him and he felt his face heating up, feeling like he sounded crazy but not caring. "We—We have to do *something*. I can't keep watching her just... fade away. I can't keep seeing her be terrified of—of that place! I *can't*!"

His voice was louder than he meant it to be, the desperation seeping out. He couldn't do this alone but he would if he had to. They knew him, what he looked like when he was determined, when his mind had the solution in its grasp and all that was left was to make it happen. They'd followed him before, first to find Will back in '83. Then to try and distract those demonic hellhounds. He was their Paladin. Too full of courage and determination and righteous fury for his own damn good.

"Okay, yeah," Max shrugged, leaning back against the wall casually, as if agreeing to torch an entire government building was something she did all the time. "I'm in. When are we doing it? Do you guys already have a plan?"

"Um," Mike blinked, feeling a bit dazed. She hadn't even flinched. "S-Sort of."

“Sort of?”

Lucas spoke up, daring to meet his not-girlfriend’s stare. “We need to get the blueprints of the place so Dustin can figure out much flammable material we’ll need to make sure the whole thing goes up. We were thinking Will could do it, since architecture is like, artsy or whatever. And Flo *loves* him... as much as Mike.”

They all looked to Will and Mike realized his friend looked pale, a sickly green tinging his face. He took a step towards him, laying a reassuring hand on his arm. “You okay, Will?”

“You’re going to... burn it?” He seemed almost dazed, like he couldn’t believe he was hearing them right. But then his eyes filled with a sudden ferocity and... hope. “You’re really going to burn it?”

It dawned on Mike, that place had been El’s prison, but it had been Will’s hell too, that year where he was taken back almost every week to be tested and prodded. He stared at his friend, his gentle, soft-spoken friend who had always deserved the best and received half that. The steely determination burning in his hazel-blues uncharacteristic as the smaller imagined the place he hated going up in smoke.

Mike reached, patting Will’s shoulder, letting a grim smile of reassurance twist his mouth as he nodded.

“To ash.”

Notes for the Chapter:

max headcanon alert. they hinted at the move from california being max's fault but never explained it, and that combined with her ability to pick locks kind of made me think maybe she was delinquent. something i hope they explain next season.

the hopper-mike dynamic is one of my favorites to write. hopper's the typical protective father but at the same time he knows el couldn't be safer with anyone else in the world. i'll never understand how

some people think hopper will hate mike. hopefully next season we'll get to watch them work on that awkward balance.

some of you guessed mike's plan, but i suppose the title made it kind of obvious.

off to burn my eleven candle (i found this awesome shop with candles all themed for the kids and i'm obsessed omg) and work on chapter three! encouragement and comments are always appreciated and loved.

-g

3. Paint it black and take it back

Notes for the Chapter:

i hate technical aspects oh my god i kept putting off trying to figure out of my idea was even plausible and i hope i sound convincing. these kids are too smart for me to write, honest to god, i almost dropped out of college three times.

enough of my bitching.

decided there's going to be four chapters instead because ending this one the way i did felt right and we'll get the grand finale in the next chapter. i wanted to get into the emotional side of it, because i totally didn't do that already lol. i just love mileven damn.

happy reading!

“Do you trust me?”

El stared at her boyfriend as he held out the scarf, his dark eyes large and pleading. She raised an eyebrow, scrunching up her face in annoyance before deflating. Reluctantly, she nodded, allowing him to come closer and wrap the soft fabric around her head, covering her eyes. A soft noise of protest left her throat as the blindness settled over her and she felt him pause.

“I know you don’t like it, but it’s important, okay?” He was gentle, carefully knotting the scarf so it wasn’t too tight. “We all worked really hard and... I don’t want to ruin it.”

There was an unexpected tone in his voice and she tried to place it. Guilt? Worry? Reluctance? Usually he was excited to surprise her but he seemed nervous more than anything. It put her own nerves on edge as he started up his car.

She honestly had no clue what was going on. Her friends had been

sneaking around for weeks, whispering things when she wasn't listening, sharing glances as if she wasn't there. For the most part she was too tired to care, the nightmares keeping her up more and more as the day of November sixth grew closer.

The anniversary always made it worse.

Sleep mostly came in the form of naps, usually during free periods or after school, but Mike had noticed her exhaustion and slid his car key into her hand one day, telling her he'd parked further out than usual. Venturing to the grey Dodge on the outer edge of the parking lot, she'd found a pillow and blanket tucked into the back, holding back tears at her amazingly thoughtful boyfriend. Occasionally when she knew she was caught up enough in a class enough to skip, she would venture out to the car and nap through a period. Sometimes she'd wake up and he'd be there, sitting in the front seat finishing her Calc homework he knew she was tired to do and giving her a crash course so she would pass the tests. Usually when that happened she would crawl over the seat into his lap and kiss him until they were both breathless and panting, trying to thank him for everything he did for her.

His unending support and thoughtfulness were one of the reasons she allowed herself to sit there now, blind and unsure. He wouldn't do it if it wasn't important.

"So, uh, how's... your dad?" Mike asked randomly and she didn't hold in a snort.

"The same as he was when you saw him yesterday. How's *your* dad?" she countered.

"Probably sleeping in the Lay-Z-Boy. He's been taking extra projects and stuff lately, trying to start saving up for my tuition and stuff for college," he sighed. "He did the same when Nancy left. I need to get a job the second I get there though."

El felt the familiar twist in her gut when he mentioned college. She knew he had plans, all of her friends did, but she still wasn't sure what she wanted. If that's what she wanted... if there was something she loved to do enough to go to college. Hopper didn't seem to be in

any hurry to shoo her from the house, but the thought of being away from Mike made her crazy. It was months away though, and she tried to put it from her mind. Something to deal with later.

“Where are we going?” she finally asked.

There was a hesitant pause. “I—I told you... it’s a surprise, um, we’re going to do something important.” She heard him lick his lips nervously. “I think it’s going to help.”

“Help what?”

“You.”

“How?”

“You’ll have to see.”

His tone made it clear he was unwilling to tell more and she huffed at his stubbornness. They’d been driving for a solid fifteen minutes and she felt antsy. Hawkins was small, it didn’t take long to get anywhere... where was he taking her? The urge to take the scarf off her eyes reached a high and she crossed her arms, trying to resist. It was Mike’s idea, whatever it was would probably be worth it.

He’d only blindfolded her once before, when he had set up a swing for her in the backyard. The blindness had freaked her out a bit but the surprise had in fact been worth it and they’d spun and swung for hours laughing and kissing, lost in the bliss of being together.

But the sun had already set and it was chilly. She shivered even though they were in the car and she heard the click of the knob as he turned the heat on. Her heart sighed. Always trying to take care of her. With an audible sigh she sat back, deciding to try and relax and let whatever he had planned happen. But she was so tired... last night had been bad, her dreams full of the cold tile hallways and bloody needles, pricking all over her skin.

It only took a moment for her head to drop back, the blindfold making everything darker as sleep took her.

“El.”

A hand was gently shaking her shoulder and she snorted sleepily sitting up and trying figure out why she was blind. Panic gripped her and then she remembered the blindfold, reaching up to feel the soft cloth that wrapped around her head.

“Oh,” she gasped, righting herself and sitting up, feeling Mike’s warmth close to her, his corduroys brushing her legging-covered thigh. “Are we here?”

“Yeah, here.” His hand helped her get out of the car and then he was leading over what felt like asphalt, footsteps steady.

There was murmuring up head, familiar voices she could recognize despite the blindfold, bickering about something. But the bigger distraction was the feeling that filled her, something odd sliding into her her stomach, a cold wash of pinpricks. The hair on the back of her neck stood up and she felt suddenly anxious, gripping Mike tighter. Dread filled her and somehow she knew where she was.

“Mike,” she whispered. “Wh-Where—”

His hand tugged the blindfold and then she was trying to blink the fuzz from her eyes, trying to place herself where she already knew she stood.

The imposing height of the Hawkins National Laboratory loomed over her, the square shape and rows of caged-in windows sucking the oxygen right out of her lungs. It was like getting punched in the chest and Mike’s arms steadied her as she staggered, the image from her nightmares suddenly alive and real and right in front of her. She tried to back up and ran into her boyfriend, who wrapped his arms around her as a sob welled up in her throat and she twisted to look at him, feeling utterly betrayed.

“Wh-Why—” She hiccuped as tears filled her eyes. “Why d-did you b-bring me *here*?”

He looked down at her and his eyes widened as he realized just how severely she was reacting, clearly caught off guard. Another sob shook her and then he was holding her tightly as she cried, a terrified wail leaving her throat.

“Shit, El, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize—” He sounded choked, full of remorse, but trying to explain his actions that had cut her like a knife. “I didn’t think you would hate it this much.”

Outrage blazed through her and she pulled back, suddenly fiery.

“You knew I would hate it?!”

“Um—”

There were hands on her back, making her lose her focus on her distressed boyfriend, and she whipped around to see Will and Max staring at her with concerned faces, Dustin and Lucas just behind them, eyes just as huge. They were all there, all her friends, who loved her and took care of her, who helped her and answered her questions, who protected her from the bullies she wasn’t allowed to fight. Will—who she’d spent countless hours with at his house as Hopper pretended not to flirt with Joyce—looked the most apologetic and understanding and she swallowed another sob as he reached forward, rubbing her back gently, trying to understand why they were okay with this.

“I’m sorry, El. We were afraid you wouldn’t want to come if we told you so we had Mike make it surprise...” He was tense too, glancing over his shoulder at the building. “Mom and Hopper think we’re at the Wheeler’s playing D&D so, uh, if anyone asks later that’s the story. We weren’t here, right?”

The fear turned to confusion and she twisted to look at all her friends and then finally back at Mike. They’d all lied to come here? Why? What was important about this?

Her boyfriend’s arms squeezed her tightly and she turned to look at him, the question on her tongue. “Why are we here?”

He seemed nervous, his leg jiggling a bit, making both of them bob as he bit his lip and then ducked his head, like he was nervous. Or maybe embarrassed? His mouth opened, to tell her whatever truth she wasn’t in the mood to hear—

“We’re burning the lab to the fucking ground!” Dustin yelped

excitedly.

El blinked, utterly confused, turning to look at him, then back at Mike, then back to her collection of friends.

“What?” She was sure she’d heard wrong.

Max chimed in then, her hand soft on her best friend’s shoulder. “We’re burning this shithole down, Ellie. So it can’t give you anymore nightmares.” A tentative, encouraging smile brightened her face. “We already doused the top floors. We just have to do the ground floor and the basement. And then—”

“BOOM!” Dustin supplied with a grin so wide it showed off the few gaps he still had in his teeth.

El blinked, speechless, trying to process all of it. They were all watching her, trying to gauge her reaction. Despite her hatred of the place, how it made her tremble and shake in fear, her heart softened. All of her friends were there, surrounding her, telling her they were going to get rid of the place that she hated so much. For *her*. More tears wetted her lashes and she hiccuped again, shoving her face against Mike’s chest as he sighed and stroked her hair, the irritation she’d felt at him melting away.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured softly enough for only her to hear. “It seemed like the only way and I know you hate it here but... I... I had to do *something*.”

She sniffled, trying to stop the tears that now felt foolish, feeling more warmth fill her chest. Had he really done this? To try and help her? The sleepless nights, the ones where she cried through the Supercom, the naps in his car and on his shoulder... he’d let that lead them here? Clearly he’d been restless, trying to find some way to rescue her from the demons that lived in her mind, the only thing he couldn’t fight with his bare hands. The one thing he couldn’t get rid of. The one thing he couldn’t keep her safe from.

Her hands still trembled but she nodded, the familiar smell of his hoodie filling her nose, the feel of his chin resting against her temple. Max’s hand was still warm on her shoulder, Dustin and Lucas

bickering quietly about something in the background. The fear quieted from a shrieking cacophony into a single, low voice, muttering in her ears. The strength of her friends filled her and she took a deep breath, let their assurances in, their certainty and resolve fill every pore and seep into her. Pushing her shoulders back she stood up straighter, lightly stepping back from Mike. Her hand stayed on his chest, anchoring her, and he lessened his grip reluctantly, arm still looped around her waist protectively.

Glancing around at the faithful Party gathered before her, she tried to set her trembling jaw, nodding resolutely.

“Okay.” Her voice was quiet but filled the space like a shout. “Let’s do it.”

There was a pause and then Dustin let out a whoop of excitement which was promptly hushed by Lucas with a rude smack. The two started roughhousing until Max elbowed her way between them, rolling her eyes, apparently unaffected by the close distance between her and her ex-boyfriend. El had noticed that too and realized they had been getting along better not because they were making up, but because they were forced to cooperate for her sake. Her heart warmed further, giving her the courage to take another step away from the security of Mike’s arms.

“How did...?” Her eyes scanned between them, waiting for someone to explain.

“It was Wheeler’s idea,” Max spouted with a shrug. “Came rushing in with some speech about nightmares and this stupid place.” She gestured back towards the Lab with bored thumb. A smirk tilted her lips up. “He said you required assistance so... here we are. We’ve been hauling gasoline out here for weeks, stashing it. Dustin made up some crazy equation for gallons—”

“Liters,” Dustin cut in.

“—Liters,” Max rolled her eyes, “per square foot. Will got the blueprints from Flo a few weeks ago, another Wheeler idea, and all of us have been hauling it out. Mostly Lucas and I, since we have cars and your boy has been busy trying to distract you. Which he did

pretty well, I guess.”

El could smell the faint acrid scent of gasoline on her friends’ clothes, wrinkling her nose and nodding. It all made sense, they were intelligent enough to have figured out exactly what they would need and determined enough to go through with it.

“We’ve only got the last few floors to do,” Lucas piped up, stepping forward a bit. “There’s three layers of lower levels and the main floor.” He picked up a gas can she hadn’t noticed in the darkness of the parking lot, holding it up as its contents sloshed, grinning brightly at her. “We thought you might want to do the honors.”

Dustin looked ready to burst but managed to let Lucas finish before busting in, “We’ve got the four main structural supports totally fucking *drenched*, so the fire should burn hot enough to melt the beams and take the whole thing down. It’s going to literally—” He made exaggerated crashing sounds with his mouth that sounded more like airplanes than fire. “And then—BOOM!”

El flinched back, not because of his tone but because the thought of walking through the doors of that place sounded completely terrible. Her back thumped against Mike who immediately sensed her hesitation. He’d been quiet so far, assessing how she took the news and hoping he hadn’t upset her too much. Now he let his arms surround her again as she stared up at the building that had once been her hellish excuse of a home.

“You sure you’re okay with this?” He sounded more worried than he meant, biting his lip. “I could take you back right now if you hate it, it’s okay if—”

“I’ll stay,” she interrupted him quickly before he could go on one of his worried tangents. “But, um... I don’t want to go in. Please.”

He slumped a bit in relief that she wasn’t totally pissed, quickly agreeing. “Of course, El, you can stay out here. I’ll leave you the key if you’re cold—actually,” he shook his head like he was stupid to not think of offering right away, “I’ll stay out here with you so you won’t be alone.”

El finally turned to look at him, noticing the way his eyes darted towards the building. He wanted to go in, to help destroy the place that had caused her so much pain. She could read it on his face, even in the pale light of the moon. He should go in.

“No... I’ll be okay. You need to help them,” she tried to argue, knowing if his stubborn mind settled there would be no point. “So it can burn *soon*. I don’t want to look at it more. Go help, okay?”

“But...” He was clearly torn.

Will’s quiet voice spoke up. “I’ll stay with her, Mike. You guys head in... I, um, didn’t really want to go back in either. Gives me the creeps. I’ll make sure she’s okay,” he assured his tallest friend. “If we need anything we have the Supercoms. But she’s right, we need to hurry before your mom checks the basement and realizes we’re not there. We can’t blow our alibi.”

It was sound reasoning and Mike slowly nodded. He was still clearly hesitant to leave his shaking girlfriend but he knew she couldn’t have better company. And they did need to hurry. If their alibi fell through they’d be the number one suspects and Mike had promised to take the blame if he needed to. But he didn’t want to need to if they could help it. Major Arson was one helluva charge.

He felt El shiver again and quickly slid his hoodie off and wrapped it around her shoulders, a gesture so usual and simple by now that she almost didn’t notice. But she stopped shivering. He nodded at Will, giving in.

“Okay. Sounds good,” he nodded turning to face the others. “Dustin, you and I will head to the lowest floor and work our way up. Lucas, Max, start on the main floor and we’ll meet in the middle and then head out.” He reached for the backpack of walkie-talkies on the ground and quickly pulled out enough for each of them. “Try not to get seperated and if anything goes wrong or you see something, get out as fast as possible. There shouldn’t be anyone but...” He shivered a bit. “Who knows what got left behind.”

They all nodded, sliding Supercoms into bags and picking up the last few cans of gas out of Lucas’s Jeep. Max and Dustin were discussing

the best technique for splashing gasoline while Lucas scoffed occasionally and Will started walking El back to the car, hoping to get her warm and feeling safe again. She paused, quickly turning and running back to Mike, her hand on his shoulder, causing him to look over his shoulder in surprise.

“Mike.”

“Hm?” He turned just as she threw herself at him, catching her but staggering a bit as he overbalanced her weight. She clung to him and after a few heartbeats he wrapped her up easily, holding her so tightly she gasped. They stayed like that, forgetting time and where they were and just breathing in the same air, immersed in each other’s presence. When she pulled back slightly, just enough so her voice wouldn’t be muffled, he let out a soft gasp, like he didn’t want to even consider letting go.

“Thank you,” she whispered, voice thick with emotion.

“Anything for you, El,” he murmured back. “Anything.”

Their lips met and he kissed her fervidly, gathering her close again as she whimpered and kissed him back, trying to tell him with desperate silence just how much he meant to her. There was a groan of grossed-out annoyance followed by a slap and “shh!” that were ignored by the couple as they tried reassure each other that everything was okay between them. When they broke apart they were both breathless and Mike smiled warmly squeezing her waist with his arms.

“Hey, I love you by the way,” he told her calmly, repeating out loud what they’d just expressed with their actions.

“I love you too. Be safe.” Her eyes were wide but a small smile teased her lips.

“I will. There’s a Supercom in the car too. You can call me if you need anything or see anything. I’ll be with Dustin. It’ll just be like half an hour, maybe less,” he assured her. “I don’t know what they left behind but if you sense anything, let us know, okay?”

“Okay.”

"Okay," he repeated solidly.

They both stood there a moment longer until Dustin called out that they needed to get moving and Mike sighed but released his grip on her. He leaned down and pressed another quick kiss to her lips and then stepped back, turning to follow the others as they headed back into the giant building.

He glanced over his shoulder and she couldn't help but smile. Her heart felt full and she wished they were alone so she could truly show him how much she loved and appreciated him. But it wasn't the time or place and as the dark silhouettes of her friends vanished into the Lab she shivered and quickly looked away, walking back to the vehicle and sliding in next to their Cleric.

Will was staring out at the vast structure, watching with careful eyes.

"It's a pretty crazy plan," he said out loud, like he was thinking to himself. El said nothing, familiar with his way of thinking. But then he turned to look at her and there was a smirk on his lips. "But it's going to feel so good when it's gone."

She remembered what he'd told her, about having to go back and have sensors put on his head, talk to people who didn't understand the problem. The ice as the Mind Flayer took over him, the feeling of screaming and not being able to say anything, forgetting people and things. Losing yourself.

That building had taken from them both. Too much. Too many times.

El let her hand slide over to his, gently taking it in her own and nodding.

"Gone."

&&&

"Mike, come *on*," Dustin whined, swinging the gas cans in his hands. "I want to light this place up already."

Mike shuffled his feet, staring around at the tile hallway, but hurried at his friend's insistence. They had made it to bottom floor twice

now, taking the stairs and trying to ignore brown splotches that etched the grout between the tiles. He remembered watching the horde of demo-dogs prowling through the building on the monitors of the security room. The bodies bleeding out, the howls and snarls, chaos and bloodshed as they tried to run down the hallways without looking.

Apparently they hadn't been able to scrub away the last of the evidence.

"I'm coming," he huffed, catching up to Dustin, his own cans of gas weighing him down. So far they'd made two trips and were hopefully done with the bottom floor. It gave him the creeps, the rows of empty rooms with glass panels, used for observing or maybe interrogating? He wasn't sure.

There were several more rooms to splash and Dustin went up to the next one, jiggling the handle and finding it locked. He eagerly pulled the lockpicking tools Max had given him, doing as she had taught and quickly getting the knob to turn. Mike rolled his eyes at his curly-headed friend's obvious excitement over his new skill, but said nothing, grateful they didn't have to make El come in and unlock the doors.

Mike's flashlight swept the interior of the room and he frowned as he spotted a bed, white sterile sheets still folded neatly, a pillow resting squarely at the end. There wasn't even any dust, the room locked away for years beneath the earth, where nothing could reach. But something about it made him shiver.

"What's that on the wall?" Dustin pointed and Mike followed his gaze, the beam of light sweeping over a small table for two with chairs, moving up to whatever Dustin had spotted. It looked like a piece of paper and Mike squinted, taking a step forward, trying to figure out what was on it.

An invisible fist knocked the air from his chest as his eyes comprehended what he was seeing.

A childish drawing, of a table with small orange cat, a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. And two stick figures, one large with

scribbled gray hair, the other small, a child for sure, with brown hair on the scalp. One word, *Papa*, the letters crude, and above the smaller figure a single number that made Mike's heart shatter into a thousand icy shards.

11

It was obvious. It was *her*. This had been *her* room. Her prison. Her home for twelve cold years.

El, the girl who'd swept in and captured his heart, who laughed pure sunshine and filled his life with so much light, had come from this dark hellhole, had grown up in this midnight nightmare. She'd been pried out of her mother by force, manipulated from birth, brainwashed, abused, mistreated, afraid and alone. Here, just a few miles away from his own warm bed and safe house, she'd been suffering.

"Mike?"

He could barely hear Dustin's voice, the touch on his shoulder suddenly setting off all the rage that had been building up inside, his hands clenching into fists, each muscle in his body trembling at the truth of what lay before him.

Every time she cried, every time she told him she was scared, that she needed him because she felt alone, because the memories were too much to bear, it had added to his hatred of what had been to her. Watching her honey-hazel eyes glowing with fear as tears streaked down her cheeks. The temper he tried to be more careful with doubled and grew and festered inside of him, the anger for her suffering and missing childhood.

The hate could only grow. For this place. For that bastard who'd charaded as her father. For the government for allowing it to happen. For his own self for living mere miles away from where she suffered and never knowing. There was only that hate that burned inside of him now.

Seeing her grow more hollow the past month, seeing how the mere thought of this place send her into panic made the fire grow hotter in

his mind, red hazing his vision as he stared around the pitiful excuse for a bedroom. Knowing she'd sat there, at the tiny table with a pack of crayons and a shaved head as a small child, drawing the only world she knew...

It made him want to fucking *blow up*.

"Mike," Dustin sounded alarmed, "Hey, buddy, are you—"

"*Fuck!*"

The word ripped from his lips and then he was throwing the metal can of gas in his hand as hard as he could towards the pitiful drawing, watching as it hit the wall with a loud crash and then fell onto the table and metal chairs with an even louder crash, spraying gasoline everywhere.

Dustin jumped back, narrowly avoiding the splash, but Mike didn't even flinch as the cold liquid splattered across the front of him. He stared at the picture, watched the dark brown color of the gasoline saturate the scribbled figures until they were corroded away.

Everything was red—hot, fiery rage pouring through every vein in his body as he remembered the tall man with white hair that had cradled her in the hallway of the middle school. How she'd tried to pull away, weak and exhausted but calling *his* name, wanting to go with *him*—a twelve year old boy she'd only known a week—instead of the man who'd raised her. Because even that one week with a bunch of strangers had been better than living *here*.

"Mike, what the fuck! You just—We could have—man, what the fuck!!" Dustin sounded alarmed more than angry, his voice breaking slightly as he reached for his Paladin, knowing something was very wrong. "Jesus, are you *okay*? What was that?!"

Mike's hand clenched hard but he finally turned to look at his friend, feeling murder in every single vein. "This was her room, Dustin. El lived *here*."

"What?" He narrowed his eyes.

"She used to sleep here... that was her drawing. It said *Eleven*," he

ground out. “This was where they... they fucked her up! Where they tried to turn her into *monster*. Where they made her open the gate and and shove her into closets and fucking *abused* her. Don’t you get it, Dustin?!” The anger roared out of him, his voice crescendoing and bouncing off of the tile walls, filling the space. “This is why she can’t fucking *sleep*! Because when she *does* all she sees is this fucking *hellhole*!”

He gasped in air, rasping, completely out breath as he trembled, muscles tight, jaw clenched, eyes burning with angry tears. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fuckin fair. No one deserved this. Especially not the girl he’d left sitting out in the car, the one who warmed his heart and filled him with happiness and understanding and love like he’d never known.

El. No longer a number. *His* El.

At the thought of her the rage started to fade and he blinked as his vision cleared, suddenly feeling very... tired. Turning from the gasoline soaked wall, he took another deep breath and quickly scrubbed at his eyes with the one part of his sleeve that didn’t have gasoline on it. Dustin’s eyes were huge as he stared at his friend and Mike felt a huge wave of shame sweep over him as he realized just how much he’d lost control.

He ducked his head, sniffing quickly and trying to find words. “S-Sorry, um, I just—”

“It’s—it’s fine, Mike,” the Bard said slowly, glancing around the room again, almost curious but solemn. “I know she tells you stuff we don’t know... I just didn’t think it was... *that* bad,” he admitted, reaching out to set a calming hand on his Paladin’s shoulder, giving him reassuring squeeze. Then his brow furrowed and he looked more serious. “But if you ever lose your shit like that again, please don’t throw metal cans at more metal... if you’d made a spark...”

Mike quickly connected the dots, realizing what he meant. The whole place would have gone up. With them inside of it. He shuddered and nodded quickly, mentally berating himself for being so stupid. He was splattered with gasoline now, meaning he’d have to throw out his clothes. More evidence to try and hide. At least he’d left his

hoodie with El.

“Sorry,” he repeated lamely. “I’m... I’m fine now. Let’s finish this.”

The room was thoroughly drenched thanks to his outburst and Dustin carefully made a trail out of it and then down the hall behind them. They had decided to only do every other room down here, hoping it would be enough to make the foundation unstable. It took another few minutes but then they were heading up the stairs to the second lowest level, trailing more gasoline along the way. Mike huffed a bit, the physical exertion a bit more than he was used to, but decided this was too important and pushed on. He wasn’t as scrawny and wimpy as he used to be, but PE was still his least favorite class and now that he drove instead of biked he wasn’t as used to laborious activity as he once was.

It was quiet then, the moment in El’s former room sobering both of them, Dustin only occasionally cracking a joke he couldn’t resist. The excitement had toned down now that he had truly started to understand that this was more than just a pyromaniac’s wet dream—it was an actual way to help their friend. The reality of where she’d come from, what she had almost been made into, weighed heavy on their shoulders. Mike was relieved to spot Lucas and Max at the end of the hallway. Or maybe not relieved once he realized what they were doing.

They were totally making out.

“Oh, Jesus fucking Christ!” Dustin yelled. “Are you guys serious?! Is this really the *time*?!”

Lucas put up his middle finger as he continued to kiss Max, both clearly having rediscovered their feelings for each other. While preparing to torch a building. Mike wasn’t really grossed out—it’s not like he and El hadn’t done the same thing—but he definitely felt exasperated at their odd timing to get back together. Oh well, it felt strangely fitting anyways. Nothing like destroying a secret government facility to help you realize what was important in life, right?

“Did you finish gassing this floor?” he said loudly, hoping they would

get the hint to take a break and be helpful.

Max reluctantly broke away from her boyfriend—wait, did this mean they were dating again? Was it safe to assume?—and nodded at Mike. She pointed at the room behind her with her thumb, keeping Lucas close with her other arm around his neck, her knee on his hip. “Just these two left. Do you have enough to cover it?”

Mike rolled his eyes at her amazing offer to stop kissing Lucas and help. “Yeah...”

“Cool.”

She went back to kissing Lucas while Dustin and Mike shared yet another eye roll before going into the last two rooms, quickly dousing the furniture and making sure it trailed out. When they made back out into the hallway the two were still going at it and Mike sighed loudly.

“Can you guys move that outside? We’re done... it’s time to *leave*,” he said pointedly, tugging on the camo bandana tied around Lucas’s head. “Come *on*, Sinclair.”

“You guys can suck face outside,” Dustin quipped. “Unless you break up again before then.”

“Fuck off, Dustin!”

The grinning Bard scurried away before any of the swinging fists could land and the couple reluctantly untangled themselves from each other. The four made their way up the stairs, occasionally tugging the reunited pair up a few steps to restart the journey as they laughed and kissed. It was hard for Mike to be mad at them when he knew he and El could be worse, but it didn’t take long for Dustin to grumpy and soon enough he was arguing with Max about the proper terminology for making out and what was *actually* considered third base. By the time they made it out of the building it was a war.

“You’ve only been kissed once,” Max snapped moodily, clearly tired of it. “So shut your virgin mouth.”

Dustin went red. “You’re lucky you’re a girl or I would kick your ass,

Mayfield!”

“I would love to see you try.”

“Dustin, if you touch her I’ll tell the entire school about that time you shit yourself in American Lit,” Lucas threatened.

“I had *food poisoning!*”

Mike quickly sped up, pushing out of the doors and jogging lightly across the parking lot to his car where he knew she was waiting.

She. Her. *El*.

A grin lit up his face, his chest suddenly warm. With her sunlight honey eyes speckled with moss, soft chocolate curls and pink lips grinning at him. So different from the shivering, shaved child he’d first met. Her existence was a miracle and the fact that she chose to exist around *him*... an even bigger miracle.

The parking lot was dark and he put a hand on the car and peeked in through the window of the passenger’s side, spying the two smaller figures inside, realizing they were asleep. Instead of ripping open the door like he planned, he paused, observing how El’s head rested on Will’s shoulder, their hands held tightly together on the seat between them. Both totally knocked out, breathing evenly as though a car in the dimly lit parking lot of the most evil place in the world was somehow now safe that they were together. He felt loathe to wake them but knew they needed to hurry and finish the plan, gently tugging the handle and opening the door.

“Hey, Will, El.” He reached, nudging each one as carefully as possible, watching as Will blinked first and sat up, stretching and disturbing El who let out a soft *hmp* as she too started to awaken. Mike grinned softly at how purely adorable she was. “Hey, we’re done.”

El still refused to budge, trying to tuck her face back against Will’s jacket and Mike grinned wider, sliding in next to her and carefully wrapping his arms around her waist, pulling her over to him with a tight squeeze.

“Oof,” she grunted as he squeezed again, “you’re squishing me.”

“Good. It’s time to wake up. We finished with the gas.”

She went stiff in his arms, her head snapping to look through the windshield as she remembered where they were. Mike didn’t let go, holding her tightly until she let out a shaky breath and relaxed again slightly. He still felt guilty for making her come—god, the look of betrayal in her eyes when she’d realized where they were had almost killed him—but they were so close to ending it...

“Come *on*, guys,” Dustin whined. “Don’t leave me alone out here with these two!”

Mike tugged her towards the door gently and after a moment of hesitation, she went, scooting out from the car and looking up again at the foreboding building, her hand resting on his chest as she shrunk back against him. Clearly she was still afraid and he tried to keep close, knowing it helped at least a little bit. Then she caught sight of Lucas and Max locked in another passionate embrace and Mike snorted as she turned to shoot him a questioning look. He shrugged a silent “I guess they’re back together” as they walked closer to the building, Will close behind.

“So, El,” Dustin pulled a lighter out of his pocket as they neared the slick trail of gasoline that soaked the asphalt. “You ready to do the honors?”

He offered the silver square to her eagerly and she stared at his outstretched hand for a moment before shrinking back, shaking her head.

“You do it,” she whispered.

Dustin frowned at her fear, softening and stepping closer, still offering her lighter. “Ah, come on, Smelly Ellie, let’s finish this,” he teased, one of his terrible nicknames managing to get her to *almost* smile. He grinned, continuing to encourage her. “You know you want to...”

“It’s okay, El, we made sure it’s safe,” Mike murmured against her

hair as she pushed herself back against his chest. “You’re safe.”

“I...” Her eyes wandered up to the building again and for a moment she just stared upward, listening to the demons hiding in the darkness. It was quiet as they observed her, seeing again how much being the presence of the Lab affected her. It was... heartbreaking.

Rather suddenly her shoulders tensed, her jaw set, and she reached, snatching the lighter from her friend’s hand and carefully flicking it open. She looked over her shoulder at Mike and he saw the sudden determination in her eyes, head tilted down, fierce and fiery.

It was the girl he’d thought he lost, the one who fought and fought and *fought*, doing whatever was necessary to make sure her friends and family and safe. The one that had walked across the gravel at the quarry with a bleeding nose and a burning stare. The one that had stared at her adoptive father with determination, saying, “I can do it” before leaving them to go and close a portal. The one who was graceful but tough, shining silver with shrapnel edges, the one who scared him but didn’t—he would never be afraid *of* her, only *for* her.

But she was looking at him and he realized why. She was waiting for what he always gave her no matter what, the thing she needed sometimes to help her push back the doubts in her mind. Encouragement. Permission, maybe, but he was sure it was less that so much as needing one more voice to silence her doubts.

“Do it, El,” he told her, voice low and rasping. “Burn it down.”

The lighter made a satisfying *click* as it lit and then she threw it nimbly, guiding it with a nudge of her mind, to hit the trail of gasoline outside of the glass doors marked with “Do Not Enter” and “No Trespassing” signs.

Everything exploded into flame.

“Holy shit!”

“Fuck!”

“Let’s get out of here!”

It was a chorus of voices but everyone listened to Lucas's last idea and scrambled towards their respective vehicles as the flames traveled towards the building, burning hotter and hotter by the second. They had been expecting it to be epic, but apparently they'd been overzealous with the amount of gasoline that had been dumped in the entrance area and the whole thing went up in flames, so hot they could feel it, quickly making a wall of flickering orange that *whooshed* into the building.

"Are we heading to the hill?!" Dustin yelled as he and Max fought for shotgun of Lucas's Jeep—Max won of course, but his eyes were fixed on their leader as he hurried his girlfriend to his own car.

"Yeah! Meet you there!" Mike called back, putting a stunned El into the Monaco as Will crawled into the backseat behind them. They had rather conveniently found a hill you could walk to from the road that had a full view of the Lab, since it would be stupid to hang around on the premises and watch the place burn until the fire department arrived. A front row seat to the destruction without the anxiety of getting caught.

The silence that had hung around most of the night filled the car as he drove, everyone in shock at what they had just done. Sure, it had been the plan for weeks, but it still didn't feel quite real. Mike's heart was racing as he drove, hoping that no one would see them driving back, that they had pulled it off. He was following Lucas closely but glanced into the rearview mirror, noticing a faint orange glow behind them through the trees.

A soft hand touched his shoulder and he almost jumped, too on edge, looking over at El, who he realized was pale. He took his right hand off the wheel, wrapping her smaller one in it and noticing she was cold. "El, hey, are you okay?"

"It's burning," she whispered, eyes vacantly staring ahead. "I can feel it."

He wanted to ask her what she meant, but Lucas flicked on his turn signal and Mike had to take his hand back as he braked abruptly, almost missing the turn. They moved onto a dirt road that disappeared into the wooded hills, going up higher and then stopping

halfway where the path ended. Both cars parked and the Party scrambled out, Dustin leading the charge up the hill, tripping and swearing as he went. Mike hung up back, helping his trembling girlfriend out of the car and taking care to lead her around the branches and bushes and uneven ground. She said nothing, but her grip on him was firm and he refrained from pestering her by asking her for millionth time if she was okay.

He already knew she wasn't.

From the top of the hill came a loud whoop and Mike glanced up, noticing the faint shapes of their friends through the trees against the starlit sky. It was clear night, chilly and crisp, the fallen leaves on the ground giving everything a sharp, earthy scent, the air clean and cool.

A perfect autumn night, Mike thought, frowning, to commit arson and traumatize my girlfriend. What was I thinking? Maybe this a bad idea, maybe I shouldn't have—

El came to an abrupt stop and Mike bumped into the back of her, startled and immediately even more worried. He had known this whole situation would be hard on her, but he was starting to worry it was too much. The Lab had messed with her mind and up until he'd avoided even mentioning it, afraid it would make it worse. Was it making it worse for her?

"El?"

"It's dying, Mike. It's not working." Her voice trembled.

"What?"

There was a worried yell up ahead and he looked up the hill, gently taking her hand and pulling her forward, trying to understand what she was talking about but wanting to reach the summit and see what the others were seeing. El let herself be tugged, following her boyfriend as they finally crested the wooded hill.

Immediately Mike understood what she meant.

The fire was dying.

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry again for taking so damn long. still working on the other story too. it's all slow but happening and i suppose i can't be too upset about it.

leave me a comment! what's going to happen? who knows? i do, but do you do too? give it a solid guess. i put a lot of detail into this one so i hope you liked it. always a sucker for those details.

good night, friends! hope to have that final chapter done this week. that's the goal anyways, but i'm terrible so we'll see.

-g

4. Please take my hand, we're in foreign land

Mike watched in horror as the glow coming from inside the lab's windows dimmed. It didn't make sense. They had made sure they'd had enough gasoline to torch the place. They had calculated and measured and—

“Fuck!” Dustin yelled. “The sprinklers!”

“You didn't turn them off?” Max asked incredulously. “It's not like they're *made to put out fires* or anything!”

“The building has been empty for four years! Why the fuck would they still have the sprinklers on?” He protested.

Lucas looked as outraged as his girlfriend. “They're probably automatic, numbnuts! Even if the water is turned off, there's some still left in the pipes!”

The three started bickering loudly but Mike couldn't care enough to join in. He hadn't thought about the sprinklers either. His heart sank as he realized their plan was going to fail, that the stupid building would never come down.

Will, who was in front of him, turned, looking as disappointed as Mike felt. He didn't say anything though, instead reaching out to pat his friend on the arm, as if to comfort. It had been so important for this to work, not just for El, but for all of them. To be together and take down the last piece that was left of the shitty past. They'd been through so much, they'd deserved this moment. The final victory.

And El...

Shame flooded in as he realized he'd made her come all the way out here for nothing. He had lied and made her come face to face with her worst nightmares, all for some silly fantasy. An idea. A stupid, ill-gotten quest.

He couldn't *save* her.

His feet felt like boulders as he slowly turned, ashamed, and dared to

look at his girlfriend's tear-stained face. She looked stunned, dazed even, eyes fixated on the dark building below them, mouth gaping open slightly. When he turned, her eyes flicked up to him, brow creasing, like she was searching for something. Then a clarity came, hazel eyes lighting like the moon coming out from behind a cloud, no trace of anger, only sadness. Her arms reached, just slightly, towards him, the invitation he so badly needed.

Mike closed the distance in two staggered strides, burying his face against her shoulder as he sagged. Tears of frustration welled in his eyes, guilt choking his throat.

"I'm sorry, El. I thought I could help you. But I can't... I—" His voice broke, a sob hiccuping against her neck. "I *lied*. I'm so sorry, El."

He sobbed again, feeling her arms reach and wrap around him, pulling him closer, offering the comfort he always shared with her back to him. She said nothing, but her fingers gently stroked the nape of his neck, tangling into his thick hair as he clung to her, sobbing out his guilt and frustration.

It took a minute for him to stop crying, but even when he had, the two just stood there, in the dark, autumn-chilled forest, clinging to each other. Finally, El spoke.

"It's *okay*, Mike. I forgive you," she said quietly, voice firm. "You tried to help. It's okay."

"I just wanted to save you from your nightmares. To make them go away..." he whispered. "But I can't. I'm not strong like you."

At that she tensed, and Mike pulled back a bit, unsure if he'd said something wrong. Her eyes were searching his again, face troubled and lost and uncertain.

"You think I'm strong?"

"You *are* strong, El. The strongest person I know." This time he seemed unsure, his brow furrowed in disbelief. "Don't you know that?"

"I..." She blinked. "But I'm so *scared* all the time."

“So?” He felt almost stunned that she didn’t seem to know. “That’s *human*. Everyone is afraid of *something*. You actually have a reason to be afraid. Everything you’ve been through... everything you’ve lost.” His hand gently cupped her cheek, thumb stroking her chin. “You’re still so kind and *good*. You only hurt to protect. You’ve saved my life —*all* our lives... more times than I can count. *He* tried to make you into a monster and a machine and something that would kill and hurt and destroy but you didn’t let yourself become that. You’re stronger than everything that’s ever tried to break you, El. Didn’t you know that?”

He stared down at her in awe, the usual amazement he always felt for her doubled at the realization that she didn’t even *know* how incredible she was. Of course she didn’t. She was raised to believe she was nothing, and even though the past years had been so much kinder and full of love, nothing could take away that feeling of worthlessness.

“You’re stronger than me and you’re stronger than that *place*. It’s okay to be afraid, okay?” He licked his lips and took a breath, the words rushing out. “You’ve earned the right to be scared, so don’t ever be upset with yourself for that. You *are* strong, but you don’t have to be all the time. I’ll still love you, El. We all will.”

Tears filled her eyes and Mike leaned down, closing the space so he could press a soft, reassuring kiss to her lips. She sighed against him, the tension she’d been holding onto seeming to slip out as her fingers tangled into his hair, deepening the kiss. He gave in, willingly, letting her take what she needed, strength and reassurance and the love he offered.

Her arms squeezed him even tighter before she let go, pulling back, chest heaving as she tried to recapture her breath, staring up at him, eyes glowing with an unabashed adoration that made Mike want to melt. For a second it just the two of them again, lost in their own, quite, safe world, hearts beating in synch.

And then her eyes drifted past him. The softness in her gaze vanished, instantly replaced with hardened steel.

Her hand pressed to his chest, and he sucked in a breath. As he

exhaled, things felt like they were going much more slowly, the whole world inching to a snail's pace. Mike felt himself being gently pushed to the side, his eyes glued on his girlfriend as a look he hadn't seen in years filled her face with fire.

Her chin tilted down, eyebrows puckering just slightly, jaw clenching as she stepped out from behind him, heading forward to their friends, who were still gathered, watching their failure burn out below them. They didn't notice her, but he couldn't look away, couldn't find words or thoughts, unable to do more than watch her.

Mike turned, still stuck in slow motion, brow furrowing, unsure of what she was doing. He felt oddly sluggish, standing and staring as she marched past their four friends, to the edge of the hill. She was shaking, he realized, but then she took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders, and slowly lifted up a single hand, fingers clawed, reaching.

This gesture he knew.

A groan left her throat, throaty and low, and then she stiffened as the power flowed through her, hand arm extended towards the lab, the place of her torment, the literal nightmare that ruled her life. Mike felt frozen, eyes wide, watching the love of his life as she let out a guttural scream and jolted forward, leaning towards her target.

"El," he whispered.

The building, so far below them, shuddered. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, or bad eyesight, but he knew she was doing *something* and for some reason, a tickle of fear tightened his stomach. A sudden cold prickling of dread.

Another scream, another shudder. Another scream.

He blinked, eyes watering from staring so intensely, and behind his eyelids he saw her again, aged twelve, in a science classroom of flickering lights. A monster roaring, and the same scream, echoing in his ears as he closed his eyes, unable to watch, the same dread and fear filling his stomach and throat, sour on his tongue.

Only this time, when he opened, she was still standing there.

“El,” he croaked again. His feet felt heavy, like they were weighted with cement, but he trudged forward, reaching their friends, who were all equally fixated on her. “El—”

BOOM!

They were far enough to be safe, but in a sudden flash, fire exploded out of the lab, blowing out the windows as the entire place erupted into a fireball. It was impressive, in all honesty, and Dustin let out a sudden whoop, the five party members rubbing at their eyes, trying to blink out the bright spot to fade from their shared vision.

“Holy shit,” Max breathed, her hand tightening in Lucas’s grip.

Will was stunned too, and both Lucas and Dustin reached out at the same time to steady their smallest friend’s shaking legs. But Mike’s eyes were still fixated on El, the only person in the whole world. The dread prickled his spine again, despite the amazing sight of the flaming building, and he took another step forward as she let out another pained scream.

A hand stopped him and he turned, confused.

Will was staring at him, face solemn. “You have to let her do this.”

Mike forced air into his lungs, anxious to take his eyes off of her for even a second. He nodded, grabbing their Cleric’s arm with his other hand and squeezing it as he pulled the grip from his sleeve.

“I know,” he agreed. “But... not alone. Not this time.”

Will’s eyes cleared and he gave a single nod, letting his arms drop, supported by the Bard and Ranger at his side.

Mike turned back to their Mage.

The odd heaviness that had weighed him down and slowed his movements was gone. He quickly reached El, who was still standing at the edge of the hill, the familiar stance of power, feet planted as she yelled. He stood to her side, unsure if he should touch her,

needing to just see her, her face red in the glow of the fire before them.

Her nose was bleeding freely, dark veins threading at her temples, eyes fixated. Tears poured down her cheeks and she let out another scream, not noticing her Paladin only inches away. Her chest heaved, rage and hatred and anger, the same emotions that had made him so irrational earlier in room that had been her prison. Only now it was *hers*.

“El,” he said calmly, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. “You did it, it’s going to burn down.”

Her teeth ground together. “Not enough.”

Just then there was the distant sound of groaning metal and Mike turned his head just in time to see one corner of the lab’s structure bend inwards. A bolt of understanding struck.

She was going to take the whole thing down.

Worry flooded in and he looked between his girlfriend and the building of evil They were too far, it was too much... she was going to overexert herself. She was going to push herself too far. It was too *much*.

To be fair, he didn’t know about the hours and days she had spent in the junkyard with Hopper, flexing her powers and growing stronger. Learning her limits and testing her abilities. He knew she was strong, but was she strong enough for this?

“El, *please*.” He couldn’t keep the fear from his voice.

She didn’t even look at him, but her jaw set, muscles clenching, and he knew she had heard him. Her stubbornness and determination were beating her need to reassure him and he knew it. But he was still afraid. There was no stopping her—It needed to be done but he was afraid she would push herself too hard, so he did the only thing he could think of.

Stepping behind her, he set his hand on her hip, steadying her trembling form, stepping close and concaving to meet her body with

his, protective and strong. She leaned back instinctively, letting him support her weight as she groaned and then cried out, knees shaking, arm wobbling. His other arm moved, sliding up the side of hers until his fingers gently wrapped around her wrist, lifting and stabilizing her. He held her up, not back, giving her the only thing he could.

His strength.

Another scream left her throat and the second corner went, metal squealing and giving away, the structure tilting sideways. Her whole body trembled, with exhaustion or adrenaline, Mike wasn't sure, but he braced himself, leaning forward to hold her weight, pressing his head to the side of hers. A sob hiccuped out of her, gasping, and he pressed a kiss to her soft curls automatically.

"You can do it, El. I've got you," he murmured. "You can do it."

"I-I c-can't," she cried out. "I'm not strong enough."

"You *are* El, fuck, you *are* strong, so strong. I'm here, I won't let you fall," he promised. "I'm right here."

A hand brushed her shoulder and Mike turned to see Will next to them, helping to hold her. Lucas and Max were on the side, Lucas helping to steady Mike as Max set her hand on El's other hip. Dustin came behind Will and Mike, holding them both too.

They were all there, together, a single pounding heartbeat, holding each other up.

"We're here, El," Will said.

"You're not alone," Lucas rumbled.

Dustin chimed in, voice almost too upbeat. "I've got you, Smelly Ellie. And your stinky boyfriend."

"You're strong enough," Max said, squeezing her friend's hip reassuringly. "You can do this."

Mike pressed his head to hers again, exhaling heavily. "We *love* you, El."

A scream tore from El's throat, crescendoing higher, and they all watched as the building began to collapse in on itself. First the sides crunched inward, like it was a piece of paper being balled up by giant hands, the metal support beams screeching as they bent. Then all at once the roof caved in and Mike inhaled sharply as the entire structure began to collapse, the rumble of falling concrete and steel roaring up the hill towards him as a cloud of dust and ash and debris billowed out, blinding their view of the entire area. The smell of burned rubble filled the air.

It was done.

All at once, El's body sagged, but Mike caught her before she could hit the ground, arms beneath hers, holding her tightly against him as Lucas and Dustin held him up despite his sudden stagger at the unexpected wait. They helped lower both of them to the ground, El tucked safely against his chest, between his legs. Will and Max quickly moved, wiping her face with their sleeves and moving her legs so she was more comfortable, taking off jackets to cover and keep her warm. The only thing that kept Mike from panicking was the feel of her breathing, chest rising and falling beneath his firm grip.

"She passed out," Max said, her fingers gently pulled El's hair back from her face. She looked over at their Bard. "Do you have any snacks? She's going to need something."

Dustin pulled out a roll of Smarties and an unopened Butterfinger out of his pockets, passing them to their Zoomer in preparation. El had yet to stir, but Max gently rubbed her leg as Mike shared his body heat, trying to warm her back up and make her comfortable. No one said anything, still too stunned by the incredible display of power their friend had just unleashed.

In the distance, the ruins of the Hawkins National Laboratory burned.

The evidence of their deed was buried in the rubble. And the beginning of El's life too. Eleven—the stolen child, the lab experiment—was officially gone, covered in ash and debris. And in the arms of those she loved, El let out a soft whine, turning her head away.

“El?” Mike gathered her in his arms, hugging her to him so tightly she squirmed. “El, you did it. You did it.”

She shifted in his arms, rolling onto her side until her face was pressed against his chest, feeling the warm arms rubbing her back, gently shaking her head as Max offered the candy bar. Her hand found Mike’s and she gazed lovingly into his eyes, her own bloodshot and weary. She let herself look around the circle of friends.

“No. We did it.”

Dustin grinned and then he dogpiled on top of the two, wrapping his arms around the couple and squeezing. Max and Lucas shared a look and almost immediately joined, and Will quickly followed, El’s arm finding his shoulders and pulling him in tightly. In the middle, Mike was still holding El, her body nestled cozily into his lap, and he shared a look of joy with her before giving in and kissing her, not caring about the snot and tears and blood that smeared on his face as he did so. It was their victory, the kiss triumphant and heavy.

This is where I want to always be, he thought.

The wail of a distant siren filtered through the trees and Max instantly gasped, pulling out of the huddle to look around, worriedly. “You guys, we have to go. We need to get back to Mike’s.”

“She’s right,” Lucas chimed in. “We could have already been found out by now.”

Mike shrugged, loathe to let El go for even a second. “My mom was on the phone with Tracy Stevens when we left and they can talk for hours. We’re probably fine.”

“But what if we’re *not*, Mike?” Lucas snapped. He paused and took a deep, calming breath, eyes closed. “Look, let’s just head back before the cops get here and start poking around. We’ll have to take the long way and avoid the main street so we’re not seen.”

He continued to worry out loud and it was enough that the hug slowly dissolved as they all stood up. Dustin helped El to her feet, keeping her steady as Mike stood, and then carefully passed her back

to her boyfriend. She was still shaky and weak, knees buckling from the strain, body tired and drained, and after almost falling trying to take two steps, Mike gave in and just picked her up, carrying her bridal style down the hill.

When they got to Mike's Dodge, Will quickly opened the passenger door and helped Mike get her into the seat. Then the two boys climbed into their own places and Mike started the car, glancing over at El and biting his lip. She was still groggy, but she was watching him, wrapped in his hoodie, and after a deep, fortifying breath, she weakly scooted her body, down the bench seat until she was wedged next to his side, tucking her face into his neck and snuggling her entire being into his. He kept his hands on the wheel and put the car into drive, knowing he couldn't stop and cuddle her yet, but he nuzzled his chin against her head, wishing he could wrap his arm around her.

"Thank you," she breathed, quiet enough that Will didn't hear. "For loving me. And sharing."

"Sharing?" he rumbled in question.

"You're strong too, Mike. You make me stronger."

"Maybe."

"You do," she said simply, letting out a sigh and tucking back into him, the conversation clearly ended.

Mike's worry about being caught was eclipsed by the sudden explosion of love he felt in his chest for his girlfriend. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for her, he'd always told her that, but now it felt like maybe she truly knew. That he would burn the world to ash if she needed him to. That he already had.

It was a quiet ride back, Mike could feel the tension and anxiety radiating off of Will in the backseat, but somehow he couldn't share the worry. His heart was too full.

They quietly pulled back into Mike's driveway, Lucas at his house and Dustin on the curb. It was hard to sneak quietly around to the

back door to the basement while carrying El, but the others all helped and soon enough they were all sitting around the D&D table, Mike in a fresh pair of clothes that didn't smell like gasoline, and the rest seeming a bit stunned that they had actually managed to pull it off. For once, even Dustin had nothing to say. All five kept glancing at El, who was dutifully munching on a stack of Eggos Dustin had made for her almost the second they'd stepped inside. His mother had still been on the phone when he'd gone upstairs to change, just like he thought, and she'd only waved at him cheerfully before going back to her conversation. His dad was luckily in Indy on a business trip and Holly had gone over to a friend's for a sleepover.

They had *done* it.

"So..." It was Will, looking around the rather stunned, unsure faces. "Um... what—" He let out a sharp breath. "What do we do now?"

Nobody seemed to have an answer, but Mike looked up from watching El, his hand still wrapped around hers. The one that wasn't shoving waffles into her mouth as quickly as possible. He'd washed the blood from her face and nose in the basement bathroom, both smiling at the memory of another time he'd cleaned her up. When things had been more dangerous but somehow more simple. Before they'd truly found out how much they'd meant to each other. She'd ended up cleaning his face too, gently taking the washcloth and wiping away the dirt and gasoline and blood she'd smeared on him when they'd kissed.

Looking at her now, exhausted but somehow content as she restored her weakened body, he realized something.

The shadow that had been haunting her eyes, the bit of darkness around the edges... was gone. Sure, the eyebags were still there, but the fear that had made her weary and unsure had vanished.

She was safe... and she knew it.

An explosion of pride filled him. He had done it. He'd saved her. With help of course, and in the end, she'd finished it, but he'd managed to take her fear and help her see the truth. That she *was* strong. But she didn't have to be all the time. And that she was loved,

and that love would keep her safe.

Mike opened his mouth to say something—anything, really—but right then sound of the basement door opening and a foot on the top of the steps interrupted and all six of them jumped.

“How’s the campaign, kids?” His mother’s voice was the usual cheerful, “cool mom” tone she used when they were all there.

“U-Um—” he cleared his throat. “It’s... great, Mom. We just finished actually, we just put everything away.”

“Good, that’s good.” She came down a few another step. “El? Sweetie, your dad called, he had to in to the station. A big fire somewhere south. He said you can go home with Will, Joyce will make up Jonathan’s room for you if you don’t want to be home alone.”

It wasn’t unusual. Hopper had gone out of town once or twice to his old precinct in New York to help a buddy on a case and she’d always stayed at the Byers’. Occasionally if he was called in late he’d give her the same option, though usually she was already tucked into bed at that point and would usually just fall asleep and awaken to find him home the next morning. Those were the best nights. A quick call on the Supercomm and she would find herself in her boyfriend’s company and very much not alone.

But tonight...

“Um, Mrs. Wheeler? Can I... stay here?” Her voice quavered, unintentional or not, and she turned her huge doe eyes up at her boyfriend’s mother. “I... don’t want to go.” A hitched breath, almost a hiccup. “I feel safe.”

Mike watched his mother practically melt. He couldn’t blame her, it’s not like he could resist El when she looked at him like that, big-eyed and vulnerable. If there was one thing that Karen Wheeler’s maternal instinct couldn’t resist, it was a scared kid, especially one of *her* kids, which El practically was.

Karen nodded, eyes gentle and understanding. “Of course you can,

sweetie. I'll fix up Nancy's room really quickly, I'm sure she has an extra set of pajamas around somewhere too. I'll call Joyce and—"

"Actually, Mrs. Wheeler," Will piped in. "Could I stay the night too? I can call my mom and tell her."

"Oh, well sure, Will, of course. Were you wanting to do a movie night? I could pop some popcorn and I'll make sure Mike's top bunk is made up with some fresh sheets..." She glanced around the room at the other three, eyebrows raised. "Were the rest of you...?"

Dustin nodded, blurting, "Yeah, Mrs. Wheeler, I think a movie night with popcorn and cookies sounds amazing, do you mind if I call my mom?"

"I'll run home and grab some extra sleeping bags. We could stay down here in the basement where there's more room," Lucas offered.

"I don't mind sharing Nancy's room with El," Max piped up. "I think you let us do that last year..."

Faced with the prospect of five guests, Karen could only nod, brow pinched like she was thinking. They'd only had a group sleepover once before, for El's birthday, playing a campaign until four in the morning and then passing out in their prospective rooms, Max and El curled up in Nancy's unused room and the four boys scattered around the basement. It had taken some finagling and many promises to skeptical parents, but by that point Hopper had caught his daughter curled up in her bed with her boyfriend enough times to figure if they really wanted to sneak off, they would do it anyways. He just didn't want to know.

"Yeah, I have some bananas that are brown, I could make some banana bars with your popcorn, and there's a six pack of Mr. Pibb in the fridge," the Wheeler matriarch was talking to herself more than anything but suddenly snapped out of it. "You call your parents and make sure it's okay, but I'm okay with it."

Mike shot his mom the most grateful look he could, all smiles, and watched her light up with that happy glow. A cool mom for sure.

"I'm going to go get those started, you call home and let me know, okay?"

She disappeared in a flurry of blonde curls and ironed skirts, up the stairs to her domain to fuss and fix up and bake, homemaker instincts in full effect.

It only took about half an hour for all parents to be called and for Lucas to run home and grab some extra sleeping bags. Max and El set up in Nancy's room, wearing matching pairs of borrowed pink pajamas, hearing the boys tromp down the stairs back to their favorite domain.

There was a knock and then Karen stuck her head in. She smiled at the two girls, tucked into the bed. They had all decided against watching a movie, feeling tired from all the excitement, especially El, figuring they needed some rest.

"Do you girls need anything else?" Mike's mom's eyes lingered on El. It was obvious she was more tired than usual and there was worried crease in Karen's forehead.

"No, we're okay," Max answered. "Thanks for letting us stay, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Of course! I'm heading to bed too, let me know if you need anything. Good night, girls."

The door shut and the two sat there on the bed, glancing at each other but saying nothing. It was quiet, the faintest sound of boyish laughter echoing up through the vents. El bit her lip, feeling her heart tug her down to where they were, but unsure of what to say to Max to explain that she wanted to abandon the room for the basement. She didn't need to say anything, it turned out, because after another few moments of silence the redhead let out a puff of breath and stood up.

"So should we take blankets and pillows or do you think they'll have enough?" she deadpanned, face passive.

El immediately understood and grinned and Max couldn't help but

grin back.

“We should take pillows. There’s blankets down there. But...” She cocked her head, listening for any sound outside the door. “One at a time.”

“Smart thinking, Ellie. I’ll zoom down, I’m quick,” Max smirked, snatching a pillow and tucking it under her arm. “Should I take any messages down to your knight in shining armor?” Her voice was teasing but she paused, hand on the doorknob, blue eyes watching her best friend.

“Mmm...” El paused to think. “Nothing you can say with words. Just tell him I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Max nodded, slowly turning the doorknob and opening the door, gliding out into the dark hall like some phantom and then gently closing the door. There were no sounds of footsteps, just silent emptiness as El was left completely alone.

And for the first time in so many years, it didn’t fill her with dread.

The silent call, the distant echo of fear that had haunted her mind for so long was gone. The lab was ashes and rubble now, no longer an open mouth waiting to swallow her back into the nightmare of her childhood. It was no longer *real*... truly just a dream that could no longer reach through the forest that surrounded Hawkins and pull her back in.

Relief glowed in her heart like an ember. And thankfulness—god, she was so *grateful*, because she knew that one of it would have happened without the help of her friends. And they wouldn’t have done it without Mike.

Mike.

Happiness sparked the ember into a burst of fiery joy that roared through her, filling her chest with warmth, the thought of her awkward, clumsy, intelligent, handsome boyfriend making her smile as she sat down on the edge of the bed. A content sigh escaped her and she let herself flop backwards, grinning up at the ceiling.

She was actually still pretty exhausted. The Eggos and banana bars and a cup of hot chocolate had helped get her energy back up but her legs still felt a little shaky if she stood for too long, her stamina wiped out. Part of her was pleased though. It had been a long time since she'd used her powers so intensely, four years since she had closed the gate beneath that damned lab. And while she hadn't passed out doing that, she'd also been much closer to her target. This had been from almost half a mile away and she had managed to take the whole thing down.

Remembering the feeling, of her nose bleeding and her power surging, the pull in her gut as she screamed in rage... it made her head start to throb again, so she brought her thoughts back to the present, sitting up. Ten minutes had passed, easily, and she decided it was time to make her way to the basement, where she knew they'd be waiting.

Her socked feet shuffled quietly across the pastel carpet, and El couldn't help but glance around the room, remembering a time when she had explored every nook and cranny. It looked basically the same, the striped wallpaper, white metal bed frame and floral bedspread. Most of the pictures had been taken when Nancy had left for college, and the posters had come down, but the essence of the oldest Wheeler child was still there. There were even the same trinkets scattered across the white dresser, a music box and a hairbrush and some jewelry that had been left behind.

The things El had marveled over as a small child with no hair or experience were now so... normal. Things that she had in her own room at home. She suddenly felt every single day and moment and heartbeat of the last four and a half years, each sadness and struggle, each triumph and smile. Even though she'd only *truly* lived for so little, it felt like a lifetime, with the ones she loved and who loved her.

With a smile she slid from the room, letting it close soundlessly behind her as she glanced down the hallway at the master bedroom, relieved to see the door shut. She stepped carefully, avoiding the creaky spots on the stairs she'd memorized from spending so many days running up them to Mike's room after school, and down them to join the Wheelers for dinner or to go to the basement for the next

campaign.

There was a light on in the kitchen when she reached the main floor and she sucked in a breath, ducking around the corner, praying it wasn't Ted poking around for a late night snack. She heard the sound of a glass being set on the counter and then liquid being poured. It was probably unwise, but she dared to peek through the doorway, spotting blonde hair and a small frame.

"You don't have to sneak. I won't tattle," Holly said nonchalantly as she put the carton of milk back into the fridge and then turned around, eyes glinting in the dark. "Max already promised me five dollars if I didn't tell Mom."

El relaxed and stepped into the kitchen, leaning against the doorway to support her shaking legs. "You won't charge me five dollars too?"

"No. Max also said you weren't feeling good. Do you want some milk?"

The eight year-old offered her glass to the teen but El shook her head, feeling touched. She and the youngest Wheeler had always just... understood each other. Not quite in the way she did with Mike, where she knew every and adored every breath and heartbeat, but in some sort of quiet way. Neither she nor Holly had talked much when she'd first come to Hawkins, but the tiny girl had quietly accepted the stranger easily, offering her crayons and a coloring books when Mike was late, or putting matching tiaras on their heads.

El *loved* Holly. And Holly loved El. It was that simple.

"No thank you. I had some hot chocolate." El could feel herself weakening, suddenly worried she wouldn't make it down the basement stairs if she didn't hurry. "I'm going to head down. Goodnight, Holly."

"Goodnight, Ellie," the younger girl smiled before sneaking back up the stairs, silent as a ghost.

The door to the basement was closed, but El could see the light shining beneath the door and staggered over to it, letting out a sharp

breath as her hands noisily slapped against the door frame. Her fingers reached for the doorknob but before she could grasp it, it turned. She barely had time to move out of the way as it flew open, revealing Mike, his worried expression melting into relief as he realized it was her standing in front of him in the darkness.

“El,” he breathed, arms reaching, supporting, pulling her towards him.

She let herself be moved, falling against him and letting him hold her trembling form as he wrapped her in his arms. “Mike,” she gasped, breath catching with sudden emotion.

They had seen each other less than half an hour ago but it felt much longer and El couldn’t help but selfishly wish she never had to leave his arms. There was such comfort there, more so than even the walls of the house she stood in. She had spent so much time trying to find where she belonged, how she could possibly fit into the world when she had been created to be something that *didn’t* fit.

All along it had been *here*, the first place she’d found and the most precious. In the arms of a boy who had believed in her, had seen her for what she truly was and recognized that she deserved humanity anyways. Who had given her his strength over the years so she could discover who she was, who she could be and who she *wanted* to be. He’d been the one to be kind and understanding and to never lose faith in her.

He’d been the one to see her fears and quiet them. To fight for her even though she was the one who’d always fought for him. To burn the world to ash for her—*just* for her.

When it came down to it, of all the places she’d been and seen and the people who had tried to tell her should she be—he was *home*. True home.

He held her firmly, his feet a few steps lower than her, putting them at equal level so he could stabilize her more easily. Her trembling hands found his face, cupping his cheeks, and she brought his lips to hers, kissing him so passionately she felt him gasp into her mouth. His hands moved lower, holding her around her waist as she melted

into him, the soft warmth that always came with his kisses burning hotter with each second that passed.

He pulled back and they both gasped for air, chests heaving in synch, his eyes two points of dark flame, making her shiver.

“I love you so much, El,” he whispered, breath warm on her face. “I love you so so much.”

Her heart beat out each letter of his name as she stroked his star-spattered cheeks with her thumbs, breathing in the scent of him, soaking in the sight of him, feeling like there would be no greater moment. The sincerity in his dark eyes made her knees weak and she captured his lips for another kiss, this one even more passionate, his hands fisting her soft pajamas as he tried to pull her even closer. When he came up for air again, she realized her face was wet, the emotions dripping down her cheeks, salt on her tongue and lips.

“I love *you*, Mike, I—” She hiccuped a breath. “Thank you, for helping me, for making me feel better, for—” Her voice broke. “For *loving* me.”

“Of course, El. Of *course*.” His hand squeezed her hip as he pressed his forehead to hers, trying to be even closer. “You don’t have to thank me. Loving you is the best thing I’ve *ever* done. Don’t thank for me something I was born to do.”

At that she sobbed, unable to understand or handle just how generous and understanding and full of love he was. She couldn’t find words, instead kissing him with all the strength she had left, trying to tell him the only way she could that he meant more to her than anything else.

Tonight wouldn’t have happened without him and she knew it. None of the good things her life might have happened if he hadn’t found her that fateful, rainy night. If he hadn’t offered her his warm jacket and said kind things, convinced her to go with him to the safety of his house. She was grateful not only to him for loving her, but for being *good*—for caring for a lost, scared soul without question.

She could have stood there forever wrapped safely in the confines of

his heart, sharing kisses and warmth and love. It was a perfect moment, where fear and doubt and uncertainty couldn't touch them. Nothing could touch them, they were floating through an endless starry sky of—

“We can *hear* you sucking face, guys!” Dustin called up the stairs. “It’s like when you stir a pot of mac’n’cheese only one hundred percent less appetizing—Ow! Don’t hit me, you know it’s true—Ow!”

El barely pulled back in time to snort out a laugh. By this point she was used to their Bard interrupting their more... intimate moments. He seemed to be prone. She laughed, face buried in Mike’s shoulder, and felt him sigh against her.

“Okay, thanks for ruining mac’n’cheese!” he yelled back.

“You’re welcome!”

She snorted again, pulling back enough to wipe at her face with the sleeve of her pajamas. At least they hadn’t been doing something actually embarrassing...

“We should probably go down there before we get caught anyways,” she told him reasonably. “You can kiss me some more later.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Of course.”

He was grinning at her, eyes soft, and he started to ease back so she would be able to get past him down the stairs, loosening his hold on her. El felt her knees start to buckle and gasped, feeling him catch her before she got too far, a worried frown crossing his face.

She patted his shoulder reassuringly. “I’m okay, just... a little shaky still. I feel okay.”

“Here, can you get on my back?” He helped her lean against the doorframe so he could turn around.

Luckily she was at the perfect height and managed to slump onto him and wrap her arms around his neck. Once her legs were secure he

took a tentative first step down the stairs, their combined weight making the wood creak beneath his feet. El nudged the door closed with her mind, wincing at the spike of pain of it caused in her temples. Too soon for that still. But she was comfortably clinging to her boyfriend's skinny but broad back, nuzzling her face against the side of his head as he safely got them down the stairs.

Their friends let out a small cheer from their various spots at the appearance of their Paladin and Mage. Will had taken the couch, Dustin on the floor next to him. Lucas and Max were entangled on the other side of the D&D table which had been turned into a miniature fort—just big enough for two. Several sheets were draped over it, one of them folded up so El could see into the small structure, where a sleeping bag had been spread out and covered in blankets, a single pillow waiting to be shared.

She could almost feel Mike grinning as he turned his head to press a kiss to her cheek.

“Your castle awaits, my lady,” he beamed. “Shall I help you inside?”

“We built it...” Lucas piped up. “Thought it might be... nice?”

El was sure she'd burst, the gratitude and love for her friends filling up her heart like syrup filling the pockets on a golden waffle. “I *love* it,” she said truthfully.

Mike bent his knees so she could climb off his back and then helped her get low enough to crawl inside. It felt cozy and safe and utterly perfect. Her boyfriend tucked her under the blankets before scooting back to close the flap, sealing them into their tiny, semi-private world. When he turned, he paused, just looking at her, her tiny frame swallowed by blankets, face peeking out.

She pouted, impatient, and reached a hand out. “Come here?”

He did as she asked, closing the space between them and crawling under the blankets, curling an arm around her waist and dragging her to him. They fell into their usual form, El tucking her head under Mike's chin as he set his hand on her lower back, legs tangling, chests brushing with each breath. She could feel his pulse beneath her ear,

reaching to set her hand on the back of his neck, fingers tangling into the hair at the nape of his neck. A soft, contented sigh left him as she stroked the silky, midnight locks, feeling him truly relax for the first time all day in her loving embrace.

It felt perfect, being snuggled into a safe pocket with her favorite person, surrounded by her best friends. The people who had always been there to help her, the ones she protected with a fierceness that rivaled a wild animal's. Her family, her Party, her world.

They had always made her feel invincible in some way. She knew she had weaknesses and fears, but when it came to them being threatened, nothing could stand in her way. When she knew the ones she loved were in danger... she felt strong.

Tonight they had tried to show her that they wanted to protect her too. Keep her safe from the monsters that hid in the shadows of her mind. The PTSD would never truly go away, the horrors of the past, but now she knew they had her back. No matter what.

And staring at the building, seeing it laugh and crackle in defiance at their attempt to destroy it, she'd found the rage, the one that had kept her wounded heart open, and used it to finally sew the bleeding tear closed. *She* had done that, with them behind her, holding her, whispering to her, reminding her that she was loved, that she was powerful. That she wasn't weak because she had fears, that she was *human*.

So she'd brought the building down, not just for herself but for them.

"Thank you," she choked out, loud enough to be heard inside her and Mike's cozy structure. "Thank you for helping me. All of you."

"Of course, Ellie," Max's voice echoed back. "You know we would do anything for you."

"*Anything*," Lucas punctuated. "Now including major arson."

Dustin piped in from the other side, "But not limited to!"

"We've got your back," Will finished.

Mike's hand rubbed up and down her back and she smiled against the front of his shirt, feeling like the safest, coziest, most perfect person to ever exist. The burden of fear had been lifted—not just the illogical one that caused the terrors at night, but the one that had existed in the very core of her being.

That someday a threat would come that she wouldn't be able to fight off. That she would lose everything she'd fought so hard to protect.

If tonight had done nothing, it had proved that she *was* strong. Strong enough to protect those around her and destroy the evil. Her doubts had crumbled with the walls of that terrible place, destroyed and crushed and swept away. Her friends had all been there, holding her and encouraging her and loving her. Telling her what she needed to know, what she always had hoped but couldn't quite believe.

Now she believed.

"Good night," she said, feeling her heart overflow, honest and open. "I love you, guys."

And as a chorus of affirmations met her ears, a warm arm wrapped around her waist, she closed her eyes and smiled. There would still be nightmares and fears and doubts. Those would never go away, not when she'd been through so much and seen so much pain. But she wasn't alone in her fight. And her fears blew like scattered ashes through windstorm, only whispers of what they once were.

There would be no more terrors, not tonight.

Notes for the Chapter:

i managed to finish something. i don't know if i love it. but i'm trying to love myself for trying and making an effort and finishing. god, i finished it.

the words weren't quite what i wanted maybe, but i can't tell. i hope it was at least somewhat what it should have been. i wanted it to be more than this but i don't know how or what so i think this is okay. i'm struggling in a lot of ways right now but i needed

to finish something. i'm happy i did it.

i didn't mean to disappear. i never do. i'm sorry for that. fall and winter and cold and shivering inside and outside... i'm struggling. but i'm still here.

sorry for being so unsure. but thank you. for finishing this with me. i love you.

-g

p.s. thank you to katie, for making me believe i could do it. you're a keeper.